

仮想領域の

ELYSION virtual region.

002_Hydrangea garden

002

ハイドランジア
ガーデン

上智一麻

JOCHI KAZUMA

Illus.

nauribon

MF文庫



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illus. nauribon

002

ハイドランジ
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Prologue – Banquet of the influential ones

Near the end of April, it was a very warm evening.

"Fuu..."

She looked down on the night view of the city spread below and sighed.

Chatting voices could be heard here and there and also a live performance of classical music in the middle.

Every sound that passes through her eardrum and is amplified, echoing in her head.

No good, lack of sleep is hitting me at full power.

The girl——Kiritou Haya drank water from a glass all at once trying to shake off drowsiness and intermittent headache. Although she hid it with light makeup and wore a vivid scarlet party dress, a glimpse of fatigue could still be seen from her expression.

As the cold water flowed through the back of her throat, the sun peaked out from behind the haze obstructing her thinking.

"Geez... a party at a time like this, tough luck is it...."

She cursed quietly and looked around the venue again.

The party hall was located at the top floor of a certain hotel. It was one of the best hotels in Japan and its furnishing was very refined, it had a really pleasant atmosphere.

Guests inside the party hall were just celebrities matching the atmosphere. The sponsor was one of the four major cyber-related corporates 'Namisagi', and all four corporates were attending parties.

In name, it was a party concerning 'presentation of the new Arclight' but that was already over, and the venue was occupied with social exchanges. Namisagi family's head changed recently, he probably wanted to make himself known.

I finished my round of greetings, I can just rest now while I listen.

Just how many people did she greet. Because she couldn't afford clumsiness, she was even more cautious than usual. Even though there

were countless times she did it since young age, she still couldn't get used to it.

"——Haya. What are you doing in a place like this."

Just as she tried to eat some food from a plate, at the exact same time sounded a voice cold as ice. Haya's heart tightened for an instant, but loosened soon after.

"I told you to show your face to the guests, haven't I."

"I have done so without any problems, Father."

As usual, with no indication of her true character she displayed the mask of 'yamato nadeshiko' as she faced the blood-related man classified as her 'father'.

——Kiritou group leader, Kiritou Kouya.

A powerful man who through management turned his company into a huge group that is one of the four biggest corporates in just a single generation. Only thoroughly seeking profit, the nickname he was given because of his ruthless finesse in which he eliminated all nuisances was——The demon king.

Same as always, this person.

They were family but she didn't feel any warmth, his eyes were stone-cold. He didn't look at his daughter too often, well, she would be troubled if he showed her his fatherly side now.

"That's fine then. I still have things to do. Just keep hiding your thoughts, keep them behind the wall."

"Understood."

For this man, his daughter Haya was only a tool.

This party was a chance for him to develop a kingdom called 'Kiritou', and she was brought in as a convenient tool for that. Haya herself understood it to a disgusting degree.

Kouya left, and Haya looked towards the ground with her heart frozen over.

It's been always like that after she speaks with that person, being reminded that she and many others would be discarded once they could not be utilized any longer.

...to think of something like that, looks like I'm really tired.

It looked like her thinking wasn't stable.

In an attempt to right herself in the outside air, Haya snuck out to the balcony in secret.

She looked up at the night sky that was closer than usual and repeatedly breathed deeply. The chilly air of the night cooled the heat of her body, the equipment attached to her wrist started flashing.

"Come to think of it, you've been trapped there for three hours now... lora, you can come out."

〈"Acknowledged."〉

Making sure no one notices, she activated the terminal.

The built-in projector displayed appearance of a small girl that looked like a fairy. The girl clad in blue light started to fly around Haya——lora started to dance in the air like a little girl.

Her figure was flying around under the night sky, seeing that fantastic sight Haya let out a sigh unintentionally, beautiful.



After looking at the fairy dance, the strain on Haya's mind loosened.

Normally it was impossible for her to relax in public. However, now she was very tired after working hard every day.

"...that's a very beautiful AI isn't it."

That is why. Until she was called out, she didn't realize her existence.

Haya was surprised and responded while immediately donning the expression intended for external relations.

There, was a girl as white as snow.

The first thing that caught her attention was the girl's skin colour, her skin was like scattered snow. No, it was not just her skin, her shining hair lit up by the moonlight was silver as well, even her fine party dress—it was all pure white.

It wasn't a bright colour, it was a colour that could've been dyed easily, like a pale white light. She was so white she gave a feeling of a mystery that shouldn't be approached.

"Is that your AI?"

The girl asked while looking at Iora who danced in the air. Haya hesitated for a moment, but it couldn't be helped now that Iora was seen, and answered honestly.

"Yeah. It's my creation."

"I see, I apologize for the sudden question. It's rare for someone to bring an AI to a place like this, so I've been surprised."

It wasn't limited to parties, bringing AI's along when in public was implicitly prohibited. Because AI's were existences made to support people, it's used mainly by people ignorant to cyber-related things. Bringing such a thing along was simply shameful.

Even so, I didn't expect to be asked about it so bluntly.

Haya looked at the pure white girl again.

She was probably one of the guests, but Haya couldn't find her on the list she had in her memory.

There was no way she would forget such a pretty girl——...no, she had an idea who might she be.

"Are you the Karasuba's second daughter?"

That's what Haya has suspected, it came from the rumours she heard at the party.

The second daughter of Karasuba's that didn't appear in public since childhood——that was the rumour with no authenticity to it.

"Yes indeed."

The girl's expression sank down.

That's how it was. If the rumours are true, she participated in the party... no, she was forced to participate because——

"...I apologize, I need to greet everyone in the hall, I must excuse myself."

"Ah——please wait a moment."

Momentarily, Haya called out to the girl stopping her, and held out data in the form of a crystal that came from a terminal.

"That's...?"

"It's a free pass to freely play in our Kiritou structure. I don't have much to give a Karasuba, however take this as proof of our acquaintance."

"Eh? B-but——ah!"

The girl had a troubled expression as she stared at the crystal.

Because of the girl's reaction, Haya took her slightly outstretched hand and forcibly transferred the program's ownership.

"With this, the pass is yours. If you don't want to use it, just dispose of it. It might be a waste of a valuable free pass, but don't mind it."

While being slightly mean, Haya achieved her goal and the white girl saved the free pass in her terminal.

"Thank you very much. If you go that far, then I shall use it to the fullest."

"I see. Ah, my recommendation is 《Aries》. My acquaintance uses it, please do try it."

The girl bowed down again embarrassed, and left.

When she completely disappeared from Haya's sight, Iora came down from the air and stood on Haya's shoulder, she had sceptical look in her eyes.

"...what is it."

⟨"What does Master intend by acting like that towards her, I don't get it."⟩

"I didn't really intend anything. If I were to name it, that would be——"

Haya stared at the numerous sparkling stars, and muttered softly towards the sky.

"Just a little, she resembled me just a bit, I wanted to help her free herself even if it is just a little bit."

The gear that marked the very beginning started to rotate quietly.

Chapter 1 – Reunion with the past

Part 1

"Lately it's been lacking the flirt ingredient, what do you think Brother?"

She cut in as soon as he started eating his lunch.

The boy who stretched his chopsticks towards the lunchboxes stopped moving, he continued to chew the omelet savouring the taste. It was just as he liked it, seasoned with salt instead of sugar.

"...yeah, tasty."

"Please don't ignore me."

It was impossible not to hear it. He put away the chopsticks reluctantly and turned towards the black-haired girl.

Glossy black hair long enough to reach her waist and mysterious eyes that had the colour of the sky. As usual her hair was tied up in twin tails and she currently got up and was on her knees.

Despite her underdeveloped body, ten out of ten men would call her 'Unusually pretty girl', and now she had a serious expression as she looked towards him in anticipation.

The boy who had the same sky-blue eyes——Tenryo Taiga asked, noticing the troublesome atmosphere.

"——so, Fuyuki. What is it?"

"I said there isn't enough of Brother and the little sister flirt ingredient."

The one who referred to herself as 'little sister' was Tenryo Fuyuki, Taiga's twin little sister. Although they didn't bear much resemblance aside from the eye colour, they were genuinely blood-related siblings.

"...for the time being, I want to confirm. What do you mean by 'flirt ingredient'? I have an idea what, but still."

"It's generated by Brother and little sister's love flirting, an essential ingredient for little sister."

"Oh, is that so. That's what I thought it was."

It's been two weeks since their reunion, after this time Taiga finally understood his little sister.

"And?"

"How dull. Let's make out here, is what I'm saying."

"...just how did you reach that conclusion."

They were inside of the Kiritou Academy's cyber department, the school the two of them were commuting to. Currently they were on the roof of the first year's building.

There was a cloudless clear sky today. Even so, the only ones who used the roof at lunchtime was just them, the siblings expanded the thin blanket in a good, sunny spot.

By the way, there should be one more person there, the girl who was always together with the siblings, but she was slightly late today because of work.

"Like I said earlier, because of the recent lack of physical contact with brother I am in a bad mood. That's why I was wondering if I could be supplied with it all at once right now."

"What is this imouto-sama saying despite sleeping together with me every night."

Rather than need of supplementation, it would rather be her having an excess of it.

Because of certain circumstances (Fuyuki's ploy) there is only one bed in the siblings' home which is why Taiga and Fuyuki sleep together. Every day Taiga suffers of sleep deprivation because of it.

Although she was his real sister, it didn't change the fact Fuyuki was an extraordinarily pretty girl. Furthermore, all she wore to sleep was practically her underwear and as a bonus she clung to him the entire night. Being able to sleep like that was an absurd thing to ask of him. If Taiga didn't cut off all feelings during nighttime, he would already have fallen long ago.

"Yahoo—— Sorry for the wait you two～"

From the direction of the school building's door came a cheerful voice. A girl entered the roof.

With chestnut brown hair fluttering in the wind, the siblings' friend Saionji Rui ran up to them lightly.

She too, was an extraordinarily pretty girl, although she was completely different from Fuyuki. The most significant and noticeable difference was her bodily development beyond that of other girls the same age.

Also, the bright atmosphere her entire body was emitting, she was like a perfect opposite of Fuyuki.

By the way, all the lunch boxes were prepared by her.

"It came. The root of all evil."

"...what is it all of a sudden?"

Feeling the thorns in Fuyuki's voice, Rui tilted her head. If Taiga who knew the entire flow of the conversation didn't understand, there was no way for her who just arrived to understand it.

"Why are you blaming Rui. She's unrelated to that right?"

Taiga was so hungry he couldn't bear it, and he reached out towards the lunch box. Or rather, since they are changing classes after break, if he didn't start eating soon he would be late. He put three small rice balls in his mouth and looked for something to drink——

"Yes, here you go."

"Oh, sankyu."

He drank the tea that was held out to him. The Japanese tea in the thermos was still slightly warm, it went well with the rice ball and its pickled plum filling.



And, he noticed Fuyuki glaring at him with a disgruntled expression, she was clearly in a bad mood.

"What is it Fuyuki?"

"Looking back at the act just now, don't you think it's weird?"

"Weird? What is?"

"You really do have zero awareness. Well I already knew that."

'Good grief', Fuyuki dropped her shoulders and sighed. She seemed somehow astonished.

"Brother, please look at Rucchan rea~lly carefully. Don't you notice anything?"

As he was told to, he stared at Rui who sat next to him, looking from the top to bottom. She was shyly, lightly swaying her body, there was nothing else significant enough to notice.

"So what's weird?"

"Even though it's lunch there's no dishes nor chopsticks, isn't that weird?"

"Eh? ...yeah, now that you say it."

Although she was late because of work, it didn't seem like Rui was in hurry. She left behind chopsticks, but carefully prepared the thermos with tea.

"You know. While Brother was eating, Rucchan was smiling the entire time and passed the thermos immediately when Brother was looking for something to drink. What is this, are you a freshly married couple...?! You bastard Brother!!"

"No, wait why are you snapping at me!?"

Further annoyed by her own words, Fuyuki pinched the back of Taiga's hand.

It simply hurt.

"Rucchan as well. We agreed on having lunch boxes occasionally, but aren't you making them on a daily basis lately?"

"Uuu... t-that's because..."

"Because what."

"Taiga says its delicious and happily eats it, that... really makes me happy, ehehe."

As Rui said it shyly, she was so lovely it made Taiga want to hug her. He couldn't look away from her——

"Flirt like that with little sister, Brother."

"It hurts, it really hurts!?"

The skin on his hand was pinched with enough force to tear it off, and he screamed in pain.

Operating under unknown logic, it seemed the powerless little sister had strange power-ups recently when she scolded her older brother.

Under the blue sky, the trio started to eat their lunch in a noisy and fun atmosphere.

Two weeks have passed——ever since the Tenryo siblings moved to New City.

"You two, have you gotten used to your new life?"

"Not yet. It's a completely different life, there's a lot of new things."

"Me too, it's been a while since I commuted to school."

Fuyuki and Taiga responded to Rui's question.

The three of them surrounded the lunch boxes laid out between them, and the conversation blossomed.

They already finished their meal, ten minutes left until the cyber-related specialized course starts. Kiritou Academy was large enough to be comparable to a small town, so they will be late unless they leave soon.

"Been a while? Was it elementary school or middle school?"

"I was attending elementary school normally until eight years ago. But I couldn't afford to go to school after being taken to Renjou."

"But isn't education compulsory?"

"On paper, I've graduated properly."

"You really did well passing the entrance exam..."

Kiritou Academy's cyber department was part of the Elysion(Cyber World), a department specializing in the professional virtual area on the network that is composed of electronic data.

Since the cyber world is a foundation of the modern life now, out of all the students aiming for Kiritou Academy, most of them aspire to enter the cyber department. Of course the level was tremendously high.

Honestly, Taiga would have failed if not for an acquaintance who tutored him.

"It was very similar for the little sister."

"Eh? Fuyuki hasn't gone to school for a while either?"

"There is an unique educational institution inside of Karasuba, little sister graduated from there. But I attended it for only a year, since I was given a special treatment allowing me to skip grades."

These twin siblings had a little, no, a very special past.

Tenryo Taiga and Tenryo Fuyuki, the siblings lost their parents on a certain day eight years ago in a traffic accident. And the two of them were taken away to separate households and spent eight years as Renjou Taiga and Karasuba Fuyuki.

They started living together again two weeks ago, in this New City where Fuyuki's best friend Saionji Rui was living in.

"Haa〜 you two really come from strange environments don't you〜"

Rui unintentionally sighed in admiration.

One corner of four major cyber-related corporates 'Karasuba' was in a scope beyond her imagination.

But the martial art masters 'Renjou' who took contracts for anything from assassination to acting as mercenaries was a region completely beyond her knowledge. And the fact that boy in front of her was a part of it was unrealistic.

"Oh, right. You two, what about club activities? It's your first time attending school properly right, why don't you enter some kind of club?"

"Club activities, speaking of which there was something like that."

"There's the Shinkansai coming too, let's go around together."

"...Shinkansai?"

"It's an official name for club activities' freshman recruitment festival. Like the name suggests, it's a festival〜"^[1]

"How did recruitment for extracurricular activities turn into a festival?"

Speaking of festival events, it was both a cultural festival and a sports festival at the same time. He never heard of a festival like that before.

"That's because there's a lot of people from Kiritou group in Kiritou Academy's board. Every year there's a struggle for human resources. There were many problems in the past, but even so the festival is fun〜. And so it became an event the entire school is involved with."

"Oh, no wonder the campus was so noisy today."

As he looked down, the upperclassmen were hurriedly running around, they were probably finishing the final preparations.

"Club activities... little sister has to pass. The exercise part is out of the question, as for everything else it's a no because little sister's skill is beyond high school level."

"Yeah〜 that's right, I guess."

As one of the top people in 'Karasuba' Fuyuki's skills were far beyond that of a normal student's. She wouldn't be able to enjoy club activities made for students.

"Brother can't do the exercise part either, right."

"Well, that's how it is. I'll have to pass on looking around, sorry."

If Taiga were to get serious in a club no one would be able to keep up with him.

Because his specs are way too different, skills and experience meant nothing compared to it.

"Then why don't you do club activities together?"

"What would you do in that case, Rui?"

"Nn— Rui-san gets bored easily. Ever since middle school I entered and quit many clubs. I guess I'll stop that now. Also, playing together with the three of us is more fun."

"And we can't do it because we need to earn a living."

"Indeed."

The genius siblings ran away from the households they were taken off to, and needed to earn their living expenses by themselves. Although they prepared a substantial amount of money beforehand, but Fuyuki was too merry when spending and bought the top floor at a luxury apartment, and they've ran out of money.

Now, the siblings started a part-time job introduced to them by Rui, although it seems like a simple monster-hunting game, the pay is pretty good. Because of that, they were reluctant to do club activities.

By the way, before Rui asked 'Why don't you do a job that allows you to draw more from your abilities?', but the circumstances didn't allow them to do so. Both of them ran away from families prominent in their own way, they couldn't afford to stand out. That's why they couldn't work in fields that involved their own specialties.

Finally, they reached the conclusion of 'We're not interested in club activities, but we'll tour the festival.', right before the lunch break ended.

Part 2

"Club activities? Taiga, do you think I have time to do such a thing?"

"Is that so."

"Seriously, don't ask me stupid questions. I'm busy."

The female student that sat on the sofa with her legs crossed bluntly while operating a machine on her wrist—and turning on the terminal. Three windows were projected displaying a three-dimensional image, the data was being changed in accordance to the movement of her fingers.

Specialized courses were taking place in the afternoon in Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Fuyuki chose a different lecture, so Taiga parted from her and Rui and was now in a small classroom in the back of a seemingly unused school building.

Originally, it was supposed to be a classroom in which the lecture of 《Configuration of virtual personality》 took place, but the only people inside of it were Taiga and the black haired female student.

The girl's name was Kiritou Haya. A third year senior from the cyber department.

She's the student council president and daughter of the 『Kiritou』 group's leader that has its headquarters in New City. Her appearance is that of a ladylike yamato nadeshiko.

But her real nature is that of someone who privatized a classroom and forged a fictional lecture, a tyrant that does whatever she wants. Taiga learned of her true nature by chance (she self destructed), and was dragged into this lecture by force.

〈"Taiga. Do not look away."〉

Just as he recalled his first meeting with Haya, something that looked like a black needle appeared in his line of sight.

Seems like she didn't overlook it, he looked back at the semitransparent girl floating in the air in front of him and pointing at him with a black pointing stick.

〈"Concentrate over here. Slacking in front of lora-sensei is unforgivable."〉

The fairy-like girl wore an outfit that imitated a teachers and glasses with a black frame, she looked different than usual.

While it was obvious from her scale, she was not human. She's a virtual personality Kiritou Haya has developed——codename lolite, nicknamed 『lora』 .

Although lora was only existing in a form of data, right now she was being projected from the terminal's three-dimensional projector. Of course the range it projected to was very broad.

Then, why was lora calling herself a 'sensei(teacher)'? There was a certain situation that happened a few days ago.

Last week, Taiga was hospitalized after being involved in a certain incident. Although he was discharged a few days later without a single injury, there was another problem. Because he was in the hospital, he couldn't attend class.

It was fatal for Taiga who wasn't good at studying, and what awaited him after he left the hospital were incomprehensible lectures.

Feeling too miserable to consult it with Fuyuki or Rui, he tried getting help from his senior, Haya.

As a result, for some reason lora ended up being his teacher, and was currently tutoring him.

That was three days ago.

"And to think I was the one teaching not too long ago—"

⟨"Now. The next one is mathematics."⟩

Somehow having fun, lora expanded the exercise books with a faint smile.

She was expressionless and apathetic until a week ago, she felt like a machine, it was unbelievable.

It was an incredible learning ability, no, it was an eerie growth rate.

It's impossible not to worry.

There was something that caused lora's rapid evolution—he glanced at Haya who said so. Although she was usually being lazy and lying down on the couch, it was different today.

She really does look busy.

It's been thirty minutes, and Haya continued to operate the windows all this time.

Her appearance suggested that she regretted losing every minute, every second. Her complexion was poor because she lacked sleep. Although Taiga worried about her, knowing the reason he couldn't tell her to stop.

The cause was the incident with lora going berserk, the one that involved Rui falling into a coma.

Taiga, Fuyuki and Haya. The three of them stopped the runaway lora, Haya had to use her status as president's daughter in the process when using a trick called 'Structure Lockdown'. However, the price was great, a large amount of work was pushed onto her in order to compensate for the losses.

『Kiritou』 worked on many matters that were confidential, so Taiga couldn't help even if he wanted to.

〈"Taiga. Don't look at Master, look over here."〉

"Yeah, I get it."

For another hour Haya quietly worked while Taiga worked hard studying.

Part 3

The specialized course ended without incidents, it was now after school.

Taiga, Fuyuki and Rui boarded the academy's dedicated linear(magnetic train) and had just left the ticket station of the New City's central station. The siblings and Rui are going home in the same direction but Rui stopped at the station as if she remembered something.

"Oh, right! Dad asked me to do shopping!"

"For the store?"

"Yup. Ah, we're not entering 《Aries》 today so that's it, see you tomorrow."

"Not going to enter?"

"We can't connect because there's a regular maintenance until 3 p.m. tomorrow, I've already told you that yesterday didn't I. Did you forget?"

《Aries》 is one of the wide variety of structures Elysion(Cyber World) consists of. It's a large scale structure tens of thousands players are using, it's a virtual world with an orthodox fantasy setting as a base. In that world, bugs and viruses are arranged to appear as monsters the trio hunts to earn money from bounties.

Now that I think about it, she said something like that.

To maintain the Aries' system, there is extensive maintenance done on a regular basis during which the structure is closed.

In general the regular maintenance is disliked, however the bugs and viruses continue to appear so there is a large quantity of bounties right after maintenance is finished. That's why, it's said to be a blessed time for some users like Taiga and the others.

"Well then, Rui-san is going. See you tomorrow!"

"Yeah."

"See you tomorrow."

Rui said her farewell and headed towards the grocery store and the siblings returned home.

Their home was the apartment on the top: fifteenth floor, too luxurious for just two high school students to live in.

Taiga took off his school uniform's blazer, sat down on the sofa located in spacious living room and sighed.

"Ah〜...I studied too much and I'm wasted〜..."

He stretched his neck making a dry sound. It seemed like (well, it didn't just seem like it) it was caused by the spartan lora's guidance, his head seemed really heavy.

"Want some coffee?"

"Please〜"

The Remotely controlled coffeemaker started to grind the beans, they were beans they got from Rui's father who runs a café so it was delicious.

"Here you go, Brother."

He received the cup from Fuyuki and took a sip. It was best to drink it right after it was ground from the beans, he enjoyed the bean's taste for a moment.

"This is really good. Master was right on the mark again——so, what is it Fuyuki?"

Suddenly, Fuyuki sat down on Taiga's lap.

His little sister's body leaned deeply entrusting her back to him, she was very light and a flowery smell drifted from her black glossy hair tickling his nostrils.

Even though we're using the same shampoo.

She acted like a spoiled child, but Taiga placed a hand on her head and gently stroked it without saying anything.

This seemed to be the 'flirting ingredient' this girl spoke of during the day.

Feeling good Fuyuki narrowed her eyes and raised the cup to her mouth—and frowned.



"...it's
bitter."

Fuyuki Tenryo
天陵 冬姫



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but Taiga placed a hand on her
head and gently stroked it
without saying anything.

This seemed to be the
'flirting ingredient' this girl
spoke of during the day.

Feeling good, Fuyuki
narrowed her eyes and raised
the cup to her mouth——

"...it's bitter."

"Well, it's black that's why. Here, milk and sugar."

*plunk**plunk**plunk**plunk**plunk**plunk**plunk*

"You put in too much."

Fuyuki listened and started to put in sugar cubes like crazy. Because of that, the coffee lost all of its flavour, and the high class coffee beans were ruined.

That's what Taiga thought in the back of his mind, but Fuyuki put in milk without stopping. Her cup of coffee turned into café au lait and she made a happy smile. Although there were many things he wanted to say, he couldn't do it seeing his little sister's happy expression.

"Speaking of which, it's the first time I've heard of Karasuba's school."

"I didn't tell you about it?"

"Well, we didn't talk about ourselves enough to know everything, there surely are one or two things we don't know about each other."

"Then, is there anything Brother doesn't want to tell his little sister?"

"Hmm, I wonder."

"So there is. I see."

Hearing Taiga dodge the subject, Fuyuki puffed her cheeks a little.

The siblings had an eight years blank, for the two of them who are fifteen years old it's more than half of their lives. That's not a gap you can fill easily just by talking.

That's when, *pikon*, a sound came out from Fuyuki's terminal and a window opened. It seemed to be an e-mail.

"It's from Rucchan. Eight o'clock tomorrow morning, meet up in Paradise."

"Oh, it's about Shinkansai, I look forward to it."

"The first festival since elementary school, little sister is also excited."

Fuyuki closed the window by tapping it and drank the contents of the cup all at once. It seemed like she didn't have enough, so she stared at Taiga's cup and put sugar cubes inside before drinking it.

"Hey hey, what are you doing Imouto-sama."

"Little sister is thirsty so let her."

"It's fine if you pour yourself a new one right?"

"No. I don't want to move away."

It might have sounded like she was being lazy, but in her case it's because she's 'sitting on her brother's lap'. As proof of that, the fact is that she is leaning her head against his chest.

"Geez..."

Having someone on top of him, Taiga couldn't move. He reluctantly tried to drink the coffee that had a large quantity of sugar and milk put in, it was too sweet so there was no flavour at all but it wasn't that bad.

"That's an indirect kiss isn't it."

"Nn? ...ah, I guess."

Looking carefully it seemed like they drank from the same side of the cup. But he didn't really care about it and sipped it again.

"Muu, even though it's an indirect kiss with your cute and wonderful little sister, your reaction is really bland."

"It's too late to be embarrassed..."

Although it's been only two weeks since he reunited with his little sister, somehow he already got used to indirect kisses. It might sound horrible for him to get used to indirect kisses with his sister but they already share the same bed (meaning is exactly as it sounds like) and there were various other things happening.

"Is it that fun to tease me?"

"Yeah. Seeing Brother blush in embarrassment is the best."

Fuyuki smiled like a little devil.

As if to fill the eight year's blank, she sought interaction with him.

"Little sister loves spending time with Brother and Rucchan the most."

He wondered why.

For Taiga, those earnest feelings of hers made his own turn in a dangerous direction.

"I'm looking forward to tomorrow's festival."

"Yeah, indeed."

As the sun set, the siblings continued to talk in a relaxed manner.

Part 4

The history of Kiritou Academy is very shallow.

While there is a lot of it to the Kiritou Group ever since the company has been founded, the school is new and it has only been about ten years since its founding. Even so, since the Kiritou Group has been growing fast thanks to the school's graduates, its popularity among students is very high.

It offered professional teaching on many subjects and its average was quite high, but it wasn't just classes, it also offered active club activities.

Three thousand students divided into various smaller and bigger clubs. The total number of those is larger than a hundred, and because there's a lot of room on the campus none of the activities are inconvenienced.

However, it's different with human resources and budget.

To have a budget assigned, achievements are required and to have achievements there's a need of obtaining talented people. The outcome of club activities is also directly linked to future employment, so every year clubs desperately look for new members.

Because the recruitment was gradually intensifying, the school side limited recruitment to a certain time period, and the public morals committee acted and created a new school event.

And it became a joint club recruitment festival held at the end of April called 'Shinkansai'.

"Woah〜 it's really busy!"

"Well, it is a festival."

Saturday, half past eight at the station in front of 'Kiritou Academy'.

In modern days due to declining academic standards, the policy called relaxed education ^[2] has been abolished, however Kiritou Academy is being supplied with a huge amount of money therefore as an independent school they were free to set their education policies.

On the route there's usually a lot of students, there's space prepared by clubs as they crammed it in overnight. It was the same scene in every direction, whether its north, south, east or west.

And there were upperclassmen whose eyes were glittering.

"Is it my imagination or do they look like carnivores looking at their prey?"

At least, it's not a look a student gives another student.

Taiga wasn't the only one who sensed this turbulent mood, a freshman who came on board of the same linear noticed the odd presence in front and didn't want to leave the station.

"Little sister wants to do an immediate U-turn and go back."

"That's no good Fuyuki, if you're not with Taiga you might get taken away."

"The worst..."

After looking outside Fuyuki wanted to catch a returning linear but was caught by Rui.

It might be unbearable for her who has a fear of strangers but if they notice her, a beautiful girl and a top grade student she won't be able to escape from people trying to recruit her. That's why Taiga had to act like a wall to help her.

"Well then, what is it..."

"Everything will be solved if Brother sacrifices himself and jumps in."

"Hey hey."

With that said, they can't stand there forever. The station will be filled when the next linear arrives and they will be forced out. Other students glanced at each other's movements.

As Taiga worried, he felt someone's hand on his back. Having a bad premonition he looked behind, and saw Fuyuki pushing his waist from behind.

"...umm, what are you doing Imouto-sama?"

"Little sister's creed is 'act according to one's word'."

Fuyuki made a big smile.

And the next moment, Taiga was pushed with all her strength.

"W-wa... hey! Uwah!"

Taiga plunged forward and left the station building, upperclassmen with club admittance forms swarmed to him. Seeing them flock to Taiga like ants flock to sugar, everyone had a painful look on their faces and Fuyuki smiled proudly.

"Then, Rucchan. Let's use this opening to slip past."

"Umm—...what about Taiga?"

"If its just that much, Brother will manage somehow. Also, he's already accustomed to being the shield of his cute little sister, if anything, he would do it until exhaustion and be satisfied afterwards."

Fuyuki left him as a decoy and pulled Rui's hand and passed by the crowd's side.

The recruiters in front of the station seemed to be the fiercest ones, the amount of people scouting decreases as they're moving away. It went to the extent of students calling out from their own spaces.

The two ran behind the building escaping from yelling people and were catching their breath under the tree's shadow.

"Fuah, finally released from that squalid atmosphere."

"That was amazing— ...I wonder if Taiga is all right, maybe he was taken somewhere——"

"I won't get caught so easily."

"Hey Taiga. When did you catch up with us?"

Rui looked towards the source of the voice, and found Taiga right beside them.

He looked really rugged, his hair was unkempt and he had club admittance forms affixed all over his body. He looked quite miserable.

"See. He's alright after all."

"I'm not alright at all. What was that?! You left me alone in that club recruitment place. That's too much."

Taiga sighed without thinking.

Although he escaped through a gap in the crowd, things like trying to forcefully sign the form with his arm was no longer recruitment. He had to fling two, maybe three people off him.

"Ahaha, I've heard rumours about it, but it really is fierce."

Taiga peeled off the papers affixed to his body and placed them in the trash. Rui took the ones he couldn't reach with his hands, and he fixed the uniform on his body.

"Now, let's see on the map where we should tour first, where we are is the part with cultural clubs, among these there's a lot of tech clubs."

Fuyuki displayed an area map from her terminal, and the three stared at it.

The area they're assigned to seemed to be determined by the type of club activities, the cyber-related activities were lined up around the area they were currently in.

"It's fine to go around once, it's a festival after all."

"No. Brother would definitely find athletic clubs more fun. And the cyber-related clubs are full of tech and machines."

"I'm in cyber department so I assumed it's a good chance to get used to it."

As for machines Taiga uses it's only the daily necessities, the terminal and machine used to dive in Elysion(Cyber World) the 'arclight'. Although in a certain sense he did use an automatically-controlled drone, he didn't have much common knowledge about these things.

"Then, let's tour the athletic clubs later, let's conquer the ones here first! Let's go~!"

"Fufufu... little sister is going to bring them down on their knees with her skill..."

"Don't do anything too flashy."

Taiga advised his sister who blurted some disturbing words, and chased after the girls.

In a nutshell, his advise was wasted.

"Haa〜 with this we toured all cyber-related clubs."

"Yeah. I'm quite tired after all that."

"Well, after trying everything that was exhibited it's obvious that you'll be tired."

Seeing a 'that was well done' expression on the girl's faces, Taiga muttered amazed.

As a matter of fact, naturally they weren't able to tour the clubs without any issues. It was mainly because of Fuyuki.

"I didn't really care about their impressions, I just pointed out the weaknesses, they don't have to necessarily improve it."

"Even so, when I told them what I thought, the club members seemed very happy."

"And because of that, when you declined their invitation they looked horrible..."

He was reminded of how students from the entire section flocked with club admittance forms after seeing the program Fuyuki made by herself. He scraped his nerves to make sure he didn't hurt anyone there.

"...but in the end even Rui participated in it."

"Yaha〜 Rui-san wasn't able to endure any longer."

The two beautiful girls were incredibly conspicuous.

Although everything calmed down after the two declared 'We're not going to enter any club' still some of the upperclassmen checked on them from a distance.

"It's gotten really tedious. Let's hurry to the sports department."

"Whose fault is it, huh?"

While exposed to many stares, Taiga and the others started to move.

"But I expected more of a school directly managed by one of the four major corporates. Looks like activities done by students are just at this level."

"Was it that bad?"

"No, the level is pretty high. I think it greatly exceeds normal high school's level. As expected of Kiritou Academy."

"Fuyuki is just too special. Probably people on the same level as president are as good as the teachers."

"As far as performance goes, Rucchan is probably the runner-up."

"...you mean that Rui is better than the majority of students in this school?"

"Yeah. Honestly, she's on so a high level it's unthinkable she grew up in a normal household."

Rui's home was an ordinary café. And come to think of it, Fuyuki was educated in Karasuba, and as the heir of Kiritou, Haya also received special education. She really was amazing.

"Yahaha... that's because I've seen Fuyuki programming many times before. I just mimicked what she did."

"Stealing technology from others is also a talent. There are people who spend a fortune and can't do it."

"Also Rucchan doesn't just mimic, you also can do others things. Especially when it comes to attack-configured programs you're better than little sister."

A program made to counter viruses and bugs in Elysion(Cyber World), that's the attack-configured program.

Generally they are programs bought from large companies that develop them. However Rui prepared them more powerful ones, both Fuyuki and Taiga use her programs all the time.

"Uuu〜...it's not that big of a deal..."

Embarrassed by the praises, Rui continued to walk at brisk pace with her cheeks dyed red.

"Look, that's the athletic club's area."

They chased after Rui, it was the first time since admission for the three of them to set foot on the east side of the school.

Kiritou Group was a major cyber-related company, but it also focused on sports as a strategy to improve its image. They own many professional sport teams, it's a system that allows sport departments students to join those after graduation.

"It's all sports grounds and gyms."

"Scholarship students gathered here in sports department from all over the country. And because there's a lot of clubs there's a need of sports grounds and facilities."

"Are they by any chance exempt from studying?"

"No, there's no such thing. The department policy is to train both mind and body. Academic skills are required to some extent in sports department. Still, compared to the normal and cyber department it's a breeze."

At the same time, exercise is encouraged in the cyber department. The ball games tournament, a sports festival or a marathon, events promoting exercise appear several times a year.

"Anyway, this is pretty quiet〜"

As they looked around, there was recruitment in the form of experiencing the club. They didn't see any club members raising their voices and actively recruiting.

"There's no point in loudly recruiting people here. The scholarship students mostly decided on their club before they came here."

Even so, in some cases they managed to find a talent from among the general students, they participate in Shinkansai to recruit managers or with similar goals.

"Well then, where shall we start touring, since little sister is horrible at sports Brother can do as he pleases."

"Do as you please, even if you say that... what about Rui?"

"I don't really have anywhere I want to go."

It was just as Fuyuki declared, her stamina was close to none and as a bonus her motoric senses were horrible. During the physical education that's twice a week she's completely out of breath.

Rui had excellent motoric senses, she definitely wouldn't lose to the students in the sports department. If she trained properly she could excel at any sport.

"...little Fuyuki is always like that—ouch! Hey!?"

"Where are you looking as you say those words, you asshole brother...!!"

Fuyuki's heel ground on his foot with a sinister sound.

"Where... of course I mean your height..."

"Hee~ Hou~ I thought you were looking at my chest, but it seems like it was my imagination."

"That's a false accusation!"

Though, the fact that he didn't look at it at all was a lie.

"...Taiga is a pervert."

"I'm saying you're wrong!"

It was an act someone looking from the side would take as flirting. As Taiga defended himself, a figure appeared a short distance away.

"What happened?"

"Nah, it seems like there's something better over there. Let's go."

Taiga brought the two of them towards the spot that caught his attention. About fifty students gathered there. A punching machine was located in the center.

"It seems like a joint martial arts project."

They received leaflets from nearby upperclassmen, written on it was 'Looking for challengers! A luxurious prize for people who clear it!'.

"What is it, you clear if you exceed the number of points set by the boxing club captain. Even if you don't reach it you can get gift goods. The prize is... no way, 《Oonira》 preferential rights!"

"Eh, really?!"

"Ooni—...what?"

It seemed like Taiga was the only one who didn't know about it, both Rui and Fuyuki looked at the leaflet as if they were to devour it.

There was a queue of people who wanted to participate on the stage, male students with strong physique hit it and left. The 'luxurious prize' must have been really good, expressions of the students who received different prizes were really dark. As Taiga tilted his neck, Rui explained.

"Umm, 《Oonira》 is one of the structures. It's been in operation for about a year, it's been really popular since then."

"The user can change it as they please, they can change the world as if it was a dream. Although I've heard there are reservations for it six months ahead of time."

"Oh, come to think of it, there's a rumour that the karate club captain's father is one of higher ups at the company managing it. It seems like he has connections."

"Fuun..."

Taiga's reaction was really bland.

Since he only knew 《Aries》 and 《Virtual New City》 he didn't know about its greatness.

But it seemed to be different for his little sister.

"Brotherr..."

It was a double combo of looking up at him and pulling the hem of his uniform. Although he knew what it was she was aiming for, she was too adorable.

"...you want to go there?"

"Yes!"

"Rui-san also wants to go there〜..."

There was no way to refuse after being asked by the two of them. Taiga lined up at the end of the queue and observed other challengers as he waited for his turn.

The goal is to score above five hundred points. The guy just now had a little more than three hundred——

If Taiga hit it at full power, the machine would definitely break. It meant he had to go easy on it, he can't score too high or too low. He has to adjust it somehow to the extent of hitting a little above the target number.

He observed the fifteen people in front of him and continued to modify the image he had by taking their specs and scores into account. Finally, Taiga's turn came.

At the reception he filled the form with 'Tenryo Taiga, Cyber Department'. And received the glove from an upperclassman who openly didn't expect anything of him.

Well no wonder. For someone from sports department, the cyber department students were a group of 'wimpy geeks'. For everyone present at the recruitment with exception of the two girls who knew him, Taiga was a 'reckless challenger'.

Taiga slowly took a deep breath, gently lowered his hips, he gathered strength according to his image while surveying his surroundings——and swung his left fist.

Just as students looked away from him, they heard a heavy and dull sound.

"F-five hundred and thirty points."

The student in charge announced the amount of points in disbelief.

And the measuring machine retracted nearly a meter away, everyone could tell that it was hit with a considerable amount of force.

"Thirty points over. ...well, this should be enough."

While the upperclassmen were taken aback, Taiga returned to the reception and held out his hand.

"I've cleared it, can I receive the prize?"

"Ah, yes. There you go."

Taiga prompted the upperclassman who blanked out and received an electronic card that can be scanned with a terminal. Then he turned on his heel and headed towards where Fuyuki and Rui were before walking away cheerfully.

"...eh, where did that guy go?!"

Before they noticed the golden egg has disappeared, the three of them were already gone.

"We got something really good. Good job Brother!"

As Taiga held the prize he acquired in his hand, Fuyuki smiled at him from the other counter seat.

Rui who peeped from the seat next to him read an explanation from her terminal.

"It can be used only for an hour~ Mm, it can't be helped. But it's free and can be used without reservation."

They were in Rui's home, at café 《Paradise》.

The three of them finished touring the Shinkansai and quickly escaping the school they returned to New City.

They already finished lunch, in the small store there were only three of them and 《Paradise》's master, Rui's father who was the back of the store.

It's Saturday and yet we're the only customers here, is this store really alright?

The food is delicious and the waitress is cute, normally 《Paradise》 would be very popular, but the location in the back of the street was really poor and there wasn't many customers entering.

But it seems like the business is booming in the evening... something is not right.

Paradise was Jyugo's hobby, and during the night it was open as a chic bar. He saw it several times, but it was always crowded.

When they used the shop like normal Taiga was at ease, but when the store he was familiar with was used like that his mood worsened.

"Taiga, why are you making such a difficult face?"

"It's nothing. So, how are you going to use these preferential rights?"

"Since theres no real time limit, we'll do it when we have time. It's our first time using such a structure so it'll be fun."

"Eh? But can't Fuyuki make a similar program?"

"Unfortunately little sister's skills are only suited for actual combat, they're unsuitable for entertainment."

Fuyuki was best at hacking, as a programmer her nature and speciality was 'optimizing the events'. And entertainment was for her 'pointless effort' and she didn't give it much thought.

"So you've never made one before?"

"...no, I've made one, just once. It was a gift for my friend. In the end, I couldn't pass it to her."

"? What do you mean Fuyuki——"

"Well then——it's about time we went back. It seems like a good moment."

As he asked the question casually, Fuyuki's voice was dark and quiet. Taiga wanted to ask her what happened since it was the first time he heard that kind of voice come from her, but it seemed like she was hiding something.

It was fifty past two in the afternoon. While it still shouldn't be a 'good moment'——

"Oh right, the maintenance in 《Aries》 should be over in ten minutes."

"Yeah. Let's dive in and hunt for a bit."

The siblings paid for the lunch and returned home and headed straight to the room in which various machines were placed which was named 'Dive Room'.

They sat down on the two chairs in the middle, and connected the equipment surrounding them.

When they turned on the machines the devices made a dull sound as they started.

A specialized machine allowing two people to dive in Elysion(Cyber World)——they proceeded with the activation of Arclight. They checked various life-support systems, the medium-sized machine was equipped with and completed preparations by linking the terminal with the headgear.

"You're quite used to it already."

"Well after doing it every day of course I'll learn it. Dive start."

He closed his eyes and muttered, his consciousness blacked out in an instant.

His body's data was stored in electronic within the terminal——and was transferred to his virtual body, his nerves and five senses were also switched one after another.

The last one to transfer was his soul. It was complex human data made of personality and memory called mental structure, it was removed from the body and embedded into the virtual body.

—— Log In ——

"...alright."

He opened his eyes and no longer saw the familiar room.

It was a fantastic spectacle of a cool mountain stream and abundant dark greenery.

A magical sky unlike that in reality was towering over him and spreading far and wide and majestic land dominated by nature.

Elysion(Cyber World)——in the modern days almost everyone used this world made up of electrons.

It's the lifeline of security and management, it's even used for research and entertainment, it seemed like a second utopia.

And that electronic world consisted of a multitude of structures rivalling the numbers of stars in the sky, both large and small.

It was one of them, a large structure managed by Kiritou Group 《Aries》 .

It's said that tens of thousands of people connect to it at the same time and subdue monsters that appear in form of naturally occurring bugs and viruses, this grand fantasy world is continuously gaining in popularity.

"I didn't log in for only a day, but it feels like it's been a while."

As Taiga pulled off grass beside him, the grass in his hand became small particles of light and faded away into nothingness. He put on the special white coat suggested to him by 《Aries》 and clenched his fist to ascertain the senses throughout his body.

"It is slightly sluggish after all."

"That can't be helped. The mental structure and virtual body aren't tuned perfectly. In the first place, Brother is the only one who can notice such a small difference."

As he looked behind, there was his little sister wearing a strange outfit that was a combination of both kimono and a dress instead of her school uniform. The red and black kimono was fitting for her long black hair.

"But your physical abilities really are monstrous. To think you can't get serious because the system cannot keep up with you."

"Even if I can't use all my strength here, it still is a good change of pace. And it's not like I can act violently in the real world now."

"Is that so, then that's good."

Fuyuki put some strength in her leg and lightly jumped to a branch three meters above the ground. Of course, it wasn't a feat Fuyuki can do normally with her poor athletic abilities.

Players connected to 《Aries》 are ranked from E to S. Additional assistance is given to the user's body depending on their rank. Fuyuki is a B-rank which is third rank from the top, and her physical ability was as she just displayed.

Tiaga's rank was the lowest since he was an E rank, but his original physical abilities exceeded that of Fuyuki's in 《Aries》.

"The move point is a bit further, it seems like we have to walk through the forest."

"That's a bit troublesome... speaking of which, isn't Rui here yet?"

"Did you call me—?"

He heard a voice from above, Rui was wearing a lab coat on top of skimpy clothes and sat on top of a small cliff.

"I took a look around here, but there's no big monsters there. We can just ignore them."

Rui lightly jumped down from a height of above ten metres and safely landed. She already had excellent athletic abilities and she was S ranked in Aries. Her status was pretty high.

"So Fuyuki, what do we do now?"

"While we can immediately start hunting some bounties since there's no shortage of them because of maintenance. But first I'll lecture Brother about 《Aries》 for a moment."

"A lecture, is there anything I can still learn after all this time?"

"There is. First, let's move to the move point——"

Fuyuki guessed something and jumped down from a branch, the next moment a rugged spear flew in between the branches.

"Oh?"

As he traced the trajectory of the spear, there in the river was a lizard-like humanoid monster holding a spear.

"A lizardman. How disrespectful for someone of such a low standing to attack this little sister."

Fuyuki landed safely and fixed her untidy hair and raised her right hand towards the sky. In her hand appeared a folding fan decorated with crimson leaves.

"Now, we're ready so let's go."

"Right—. There's three of them so it's one for each of us."

Taiga pulled out an over a meter long Japanese sword from his waist and Rui placed small pebbles in a characteristic shape between her fingers.

Taiga's 《Heavenly Sword》, Fuyuki's 《Elemental Sphere》, and Rui's 《Creative Stones》——Starting their respective attack-configured programs the three of them started to move at the same time.

In an instant Taiga closed the distance between them and cut both the lizardman and his spear in two. Fuyuki broke the red sphere with her fan and summoned a flame and the creative stones Rui has thrown changed into swords before piercing the enemy's body.

These blows exceeded the lizardmen's durability and they turned into particles of light.

This was the 《Aries》 structure. Each and every player in this world acts as a debugger.

Among the monsters there were powerful individual with a bounty money on them and only the strong players were able to subdue those.

Taiga and the others were a three people team that subdued enemies for bounty every day.

"I have to fight against these guys again..."

Ten minutes later, for some reason Taiga ended up alone in the forest.

He was separated from the others after defeating the lizardman from before, it was the same forest in which he first fought monsters two weeks earlier.

Blocking Taiga's way was the over two metres long worm (or an organisms resembling a pink earthworm) and a herd of giant mantises.

Since they looked disgusting he didn't want to fight them ever again——

"It can't be helped."

Taiga gave up and started to dismantle the monsters whose appearance was based on insects.

Of course, he didn't come to a place like this for fun.

There was a small update together with this maintenance, it was a fix applied to all players of rank B and above. Fuyuki and Rui went to a place called central district to apply the procedure. As they went ahead, Taiga was left alone.

And thus, Taiga continued to walk through the forest that was crawling with small fries, just as Fuyuki told him to, he arrived in the open area soon after.

"The starting point should be around here..."

It was right beside the forest's exit, a wide grassland. A carpet of golden-coloured natural grass spread all over. The majestic grassland occupied the entire scenery stretching for kilometres, it spread as far as he could see.

Taiga didn't know what to do after that. Although he was told to wait in this place, he couldn't just stand like an idiot in the prairie.

He started to walk to the centre of the grassland, as he headed towards it he found a girl rooted on spot, he stopped moving.

"——Eh?"

Seeing people wasn't rare, but what caught his attention was the way she was dressed.

She wore plain, real clothes rather than an outfit from 《Aries》, and she had no weapons. It was the first time she came from the real world into this place, he was convinced of that.

"Uuuu... it isn't too user friendly... I want a manual..."



The girl was glaring at the opened window, and complained dissatisfied with a small voice. She didn't notice him at all.

I still have some time.

He made a fast decision, and changed his destination. He walked towards the girl.

She noticed the sound of his footsteps, looked towards him and asked warily.

"...who?"

"No, I thought you seem to have some trouble so I wanted to help you out. I'm not anyone suspicious... I think."

Recalling how he was clothed (and that he carried a sword) he spoke more politely. With that, the girl's gaze softened, it didn't seem like she found him suspicious.

Like light snow—he thought that as he looked at the girl.

That could've been because she had cool shoulder-length hair, or maybe that was because of the atmosphere she exuded. Or perhaps both.

She was slightly taller than Fuyuki, and her age was about the same. She had a thin body that could be encompassed by a single arm, her hands and feet seemed like they would break with just a little force. Her skin was so white, it seemed as if she never went out. She looked like a western doll, there was no other girl that description would fit better.

A light snow that would melt away the moment it was touched, that was his first impression of the silver-haired girl.

"So, what happened?"

"...umm, I only have the initial settings set-up here... and I can't move now."

"Indeed, going anywhere while looking like that would be disastrous."

The white one piece wasn't offering enough protection, and her white skin would definitely bait monsters in.

"Sorry, I don't know how to change the initial settings either."

"...is that so."

The girl's dropped her shoulders disappointed. And looking at the crystal she had in her right hand she sighed.

"It's too early to give up. Others will come in a moment. They did my initial settings before, why don't they teach you?"

The girl didn't know whether she should trust Taiga, she was at a loss for a moment—and gave him a small nod.

"I'll wait then."

"I see."

Just the two of them in the vast grassland, Taiga and the silver-haired girl continued to wait.

The atmosphere seemed uncomfortable ever since they met, the girl seemed to hate it and was acting restless; staring away. Fuyuki was scared of strangers, but this girl might be beyond that level.

"Are you alone?"

Maybe that was why Taiga tried talking to her naturally.

Although the girl was flustered after being talked to suddenly, she slowly fixed her breathing and replied.

"...yes. I just dived for a bit to have a change of pace from studying."

"Is that so. That free pass a moment ago, what was that?"

"Umm, something I was given. I wanted to throw it away."

He expanded the conversation bit by bit.

While not trying to press on her too much, he tried to accustom her to talking with people——what he learned when dealing with Fuyuki was useful.

They talked about silly things for a few minutes, and the girl's stiffness gradually went away.

Finally, he saw Fuyuki's and Rui's figures at the edge of the forest, and at that moment.

"Ah, Taiga—! Sorry for the wait〜!"

Rui came over while waving her hand, Taiga answered raising his own. And when he attempted to introduce the girl—he noticed an abnormality.

"...those eyes, long black hair... it can't be..."

The girl murmured while dumbfounded and stared at the two who were walking towards them.

No, she wasn't looking at the two of them, the one she stared at was——

"...eh?"

The girl's gazes met, and Fuyuki's expression froze.

"...Hime-chan?"

The silver-haired girl muttered someone's name in disbelief. There was only one person among them with 「Hime」 in her name.^[3]

Taiga stared at his little sister's face as he thought that——

"...why are you here... Karasuba Shio."

With a trembling voice Fuyuki spoke the name of the silver-haired girl.

References

1. ↑ 祭 (sai) which is the last kanji in the Shinkansai name if written alone means festival (matsuri), all kinds of festival names often end with 祭 (sai).
2. ↑ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yutori_education
3. ↑ Fuyuki's name is written as 冬姫, and the 姫 kanji can be read as Hime.

Chapter 2 – The light and the shadow

Part 1

Silence had come.

The two girls who had an unexpected, chance meeting were at a loss for words. Neither Taiga nor Rui knew anything about it and their gaze drifted between Fuyuki and the silver-haired girl.

"H-hey... Hime-chan..."

"Most likely she refers to Fuyuki. Also that name... Karasuba Shio, was it."

"By Karasuba, does she mean that Karasuba...?"

Karasuba. The name that is known throughout the entire world. One of the four major corporates that governs the cyber market. The household Fuyuki was adopted to eight years ago, and from which she ran away just the other day.

"It's been a while, hasn't it."

The one who broke the silence was the silver-haired girl——Karasuba Shio.

"It's the first time we meet face-to-face... in seven years, was it? I recognized you immediately thanks to your eye colour."

Fuyuki didn't answer. But the moment she heard that it's been seven years, she started to tremble as if she was frightened of something and looked down. Seeing Fuyuki act clearly different than usual, Rui asked him in a low voice.

"...how are they related?"

"Who knows... but considering her state, they aren't simply acquaintances."

Compared to the scared Fuyuki, Shio looked pretty normal. It felt like Fuyuki felt one-sidedly at fault about something.

Taiga felt a strange discomfort from the girl called Karasuba Shio.

"...why... are you here..."

Fuyuki asked with a trembling voice.

"That's my line. The culprit who hacked the main server of Karasuba, no matter how much you camouflaged it is probably Hime-chan right? As always, your skills are amazing."

After hearing Shio's word, Taiga noticed what was causing him discomfort.

Not just the fact that she carried the name of Karasuba, it was without a doubt that she was a member of that group.

Because Fuyuki dealt extensive damage to Karasuba, it wasn't a happy reunion but a meeting with an opponent who denounced her crimes.

Even so, the girl called Karasuba Shio only felt respect and admiration.

"...aren't you angry?"

It seemed like Fuyuki thought the same and asked the question.

For some reason. His little sister thought otherwise——without any basis for it, that's what intuition told Taiga.

"Angry? Me? Why would I be?"

"Because... little sister at that time..."

Fuyuki's voice was very feeble, it was completely different from her usual voice that was filled with self-confidence.

It wasn't a devil who bullied his little sister, it was a single frail girl.

"I'm not angry or anything. If anything, I'm grateful to Hime-chan."

"Gra...teful...?"

"Yup. It's all thanks to Hime-chan. Even if I play around like this I won't be told off by father, the fact that all the work has been wasted, all of it, was thanks to Hime-chan helping me and the researchers to give up."

The silver-haired girl said so and smiled faintly.

Not an evil, but a colourless transparent smile that displayed negative feelings.

"....."

The moment she saw that smile, Fuyuki realized just how much did that girl change in seven years. No, how much she herself changed.

When she thought so, Fuyuki turned her back to Shio and ran away.

Taiga's and Rui's voice didn't reach her from behind.

She wanted to run away as soon as possible from the mistakes she made, run away from the past that should have been left behind.

Where are you going to run now? —Where this time? She felt as if she heard a voice saying that behind her.

When Taiga returned to the real world, it was already evening.

"...now. Where did Imouto-sama go?"

The vermilion light of the setting sun entered through the gap in the curtains, Taiga turned off the Arclight and squinted. Instead of his little sister's figure on the second machine's seat, there was a headgear thrown on the floor. Before, when Taiga did something similar she got really angry and said 'and what if it broke?'.

She'll probably be over there...

He left the dive room to look for his little sister and entered the bedroom.

As expected, she hid behind the large bed that filled nearly half of the room. She squeezed herself into a small gap and sat down while holding her knees.

"Found you. It still didn't change even after eight years, your habit of squeezing yourself into narrow places when you're down."

"...Onii."

"Oh, that's an unusual way of calling me."

Taiga sat on the edge of the bed and gently stroked his little sister's head. Her sleek black hair flowed with just a light touch, it felt very comfortable.

"Don't misunderstand though, I'm not feeling down. I just thought it would be nice to sit in a place like this since it's been a while."

"Is that so."

The conversation ended with just that, Taiga continued to gently stroke his little sister's head as she tried to act strong. He didn't ask anything, he didn't say anything. He believed that was for the best at the moment.

〈"So, how's Fuyuki?"〉

"She went to take a bath, we're going to rest early today."

Taiga spoke to a holographic window in front of him as he cleaned the dishes after dinner. Displayed on it was Rui who was in middle of work, she had an appearance of a neat and clean maid.

〈"Shio-chan, was it. Did you hear the circumstances concerning that girl?"〉

"No, I didn't hear anything. And I have no intention of asking her."

〈"Eh? Why?"〉

"It's just my intuition, but it isn't just depression. Let's just wait until Fuyuki tells us by herself."

In fact, he really wanted to help his sister immediately. But... if he did that it might backfire, that's what he felt.

It was a problem between those two.

〈"I see. Yup. If Taiga thinks so, it has to be like that."〉

Rui smiled as she said so. Just by looking at her cheerful expression, he felt better over the fact that he neglected Fuyuki.

〈"Ah, but you shouldn't leave her alone."〉

"I know. I want to consult with you, are you free tomorrow?"

〈"Nn~, I'll have to help in the shop a bit in the morning, but aside from that there's nothing."〉

"That's good. —Tomorrow's the 1st, I want you to take Fuyuki outside, please."

〈"That shouldn't be a problem."〉

"I appreciate it. Ah, one more thing. Teach me how to set-up initial settings in 《Aries》."

⟨"...how to set-up initial settings?"⟩

Not knowing the purpose of his request, Rui made a questioning smile.

Part 2

Next day, nine o'clock in the morning.

"...fuu, I've sweat a lot."

After his routine training Taiga took a shower and was eating breakfast in the living room.

Because he couldn't cook, it was a simple meal made up of bread and coffee.

It was Sunday, a regular holiday. Of course there was no school today.

Although he spent five hours of his holiday on his training routine, he cleaned up the dishes and entered the bedroom Fuyuki was sleeping in.

"Fuyuki, it's about time to wake up."

"...nnyuu...still...sleepy..."

He poked the sleeping Fuyuki's shoulder, but she shook off his hand. The futon fell off her body so her thin negligee and black laced lingerie were visible so he looked away momentarily. Although he was accustomed to it, he still couldn't look at it directly.

"An hour longer, let me sleep for another hour..."

"Don't act selfish, hurry and wake up."

Even though she always said she wants to sleep a little bit more, this time it was much worse than usual.

With grim determination Taiga cast away the futon and carried Fuyuki in his embrace to the washroom. With that Fuyuki opened her eyes and complained "Why do I have to get up on a holiday..." before washing her face, fixing her hair and changing into a proper dress.

...she looks better than I thought.

Taiga felt relieved seeing her act like usual. It might have been her just acting strong like the day before but it was still better than her shutting herself in.

And then, *ding-dong*, a sound of intercom resounded.

"Who is it so early in the morning?"

"She came. Hey, come on."

Taiga headed towards the front door while pulling Fuyuki's hand and opened the door.

"Yahoo〜! Good morning you two〜!"

"...Rucchan?"

The one who greeted them with a big smile on her face was Saionji Rui. Her chestnut fluffy hair bounced, emitting an aura as bright as the sun.

"Then Rui, I leave the rest to you."

"Yeah, leave it to me. That's why... let's go Fuyuki!"

"Eh?"

Suddenly Rui grabbed Fuyuki's arm and pulled her outside by force. Significantly weaker Fuyuki did her best to protest and at least wear shoes.

"Rucchan?! What's this all of a sudden?!"

"Then Taiga, we'll be back before dinner!"

"Have fu—"

"Before that explain——no, Rucchan don't pull me I'll walk on my own!"

"Come outside first〜"

She suddenly pulled the confused Fuyuki towards the elevator, and the door was closed. Their voices slowly faded and silence came.

"...now, let's get to work."

He returned to the dive room and immediately started preparations to start the Arclight.

It was absolutely necessary to dive alone today.

"——Dive start."

The moment he said those words his consciousness dived into the paradise consisting of electrons.

After a moment of light-headedness, Taiga stood in the middle of the grassland that was the starting point.

"This place... it really is huge."

According to Rui's explanation he heard last night, people who connect for the first time will always appear in here. But, how many people could it hold. He thought it was wide enough to hold several hundred people at the same time.

"Now, I wonder if she's here——oh, there she is."

Just as planned, no, he found the person he wanted to see earlier than expected. Taiga smiled because he was very lucky.

"...I was prepared to wait for half a day, it's really my lucky day."

His line of sight was focused on the silver-haired girl who manipulated windows just like the day before. She was startled and had a surprised expression.

"Hey, we meet again."

"Ah... umm... the person I met yesterday?"

A girl wearing a dress unsuitable for Aries——Karasuba Shio stared at him puzzled. Taiga approached her not minding it and looked at the window from the side.

"Are you still struggling with the difficult settings?"

"...y-yes."

Although it seemed like she tried various things, she still couldn't get past them. She didn't contact the management, it was convenient for Taiga. Thanks to that he could easily enter a conversation with her.

"Sorry for suddenly logging out yesterday. Although I can only say sorry, but do you want me to teach you how to set up the default settings? I've learned it earlier."

"Eh...? Is that okay?"

"That was my intention from the beginning. Also——I'm interested since you are Fuyuki's acquaintance."

The moment she heard that name Shio made a long face. It seemed like she wasn't just an acquaintance.

"For the time being let me introduce myself. I'm Tenryo Taiga, Fuyuki's brother."

"Hime-chan's onii-san...?"

Shio looked at Taiga's entire body suspiciously and in the end she stared at his sky blue eyes.

"Oh you really are, your eye colour is identical."

Their pupils had a very rare colour. Even though the siblings didn't look much alike, it was clear with just that much.

"I see. Hime-chan's name was originally Tenryo..."

Mixed feelings swirled in Shio's pupils as she murmured that.

After catching her interest Taiga continued.

"Then, are you going to take me up on my offer?"

"...I would be really thankful but, is it fine with Onii-san?"

"I don't mind at all——also, by 'Onii-san' you mean me?"

"Yup. Because you're Hime-chan's Onii-san right?"

He wondered about being called like that. But if Shio was fine with that, he didn't want to force her to change it. It was a little embarrassing, but it wasn't all that bad.

Even though Shio's fear of strangers was on Fuyuki's level judging by the glare she gave him, she was surprisingly sociable or rather he felt that she was more open-minded. Maybe it was thanks to the conversation they had yesterday, or because he was Fuyuki's brother.

Anyway, it seems like a good start.

He continued to shorten the distance that way.

"You can call me what you like. Ah, also I'm going to teach you now how to set-up the default settings. This is the recommended setting for people who are poor at athletics."

"...eh? Why do you know I'm bad at it?"

"I can tell that much just by looking at you."

Not only he could tell if someone was poor at exercising, but could also measure their physical ability just by looking at their arm and leg muscles.

Shio was about the same as Fuyuki, maybe a little worse. It would be hard for her to suddenly play or have a battle in a structure like that.

"...I didn't have time to spare for exercises."

She didn't have time to exercise——these words caught his attention a little, but it wasn't time to pursue their meaning.

"Then about the setting? Can you show me how to fight too?"

"If you want to, then yeah."

"...Onii-san, do you know about me and Hime-chan?"

"Nope, not at all. I don't want to stick my neck into a problem between the two of you, I have no intention of doing that. That would be meddling."

Hearing that, Shio closed her eyes to think for a moment.

Honestly, it might have been a pointless act done by Taiga. He won't learn anything about Shio with this, and it won't cheer Fuyuki up.

He just couldn't leave her alone like that. But with her crippled smile, she looked similar to his little sister.

"...then, just for a moment I'll be intruding on you."

Like that, a strange pair has formed for a limited amount of time.

"Umm, this goes here and this here——oh, it's starting it's starting."

He fiddled with the open window based on his memory of what Rui taught him, another window expanded and an artificial voice announced.

〈"Welcome to 《Aries》 structure managed by the Kiritou Group. From now on you shall become inhabitants of this world and hunt monsters during your adventures."〉

A promotional video briefly describing mechanisms of 《Aries》 was played. On a dozen number of screens were displayed all kind of weapons.

〈"Now, please pick your attack-configured program. If you have prepared one yourself, then skip this step. Also, together with this initial armament, your costume will also be changed automatically."〉

The weapon that could be chosen were: two handed swords, one handed swords, shields, bows, knives, hammers, spears, Japanese swords. There were also minor weapons like tonfas or kusarigamas.

"I have to choose from those? There's so many that I'm lost..."

"Do you have any experience using these... there's no way you do, is there."

"Yup."

"Then, between short and long range which one you'd like better?"

"...long range."

There were several ranged weapons from relatively major ones like bows and crossbows to things like chakrams, there were also weapons not even Taiga touched before. Aries was really dreadful.

"For the time being let's try the bow. ...ah, it seems like I can pick a secondary weapon."

"Then you should pick a melee weapon. One with small reach should be fine. Shio wouldn't be able to swing a long one properly, right?"

After selecting a dagger as her secondary weapon, a blue light wrapped around Shio.

Light particles flocked and covered Shio's virtual body. When the phosphorescence disappeared her outfit completely changed.

"Oh—...you look like a hunter."

She wore a stunning hunter costume. Taiga didn't know, but the costume had an elven motif.

Probably to better conceal in the woods (or at least that was the setting) it was mostly green.

Her shoulders were bare for her upper body's ease of movement and her thighs were exposed. But it wasn't excessive exposure, on her right leg she had a knee-sock, on her left she had a belt holding the dagger.

"This is somewhat... weird outfit. And its pretty risqué too..."

"Nono, that much is still alright. You look pretty good in it."

Although the costume gave her a flexible and graceful image, but strangely it didn't feel like a mismatch. Rather than that, coupled with her pure white skin and silver hair it added to her mysterious atmosphere.

Shio turned around to check her own appearance, on her back there was a rugged bow, something she had never seen in her everyday life. She stared at it.

And then, something out of place appeared on the edge of her field of view. Floating ten meters away was a plate with circles drawn on it.

"You have to shoot that, probably."

"Eh? ...that's impossible. I've never done it before, there's no way I'll hit something so small."

"Just try it for the time being. We'll discuss it later."

"B-but there's no arrow——"

The moment she said that an arrow appeared on Shio's palm. At the same time 〈"The arrow is automatically generated by the image."〉 sounded an announcement which cut off her escape route.

"Looks like there's one. Come on, let's challenge."^[1]

"Uuu... Onii-san is high-handed..."

The window displayed an arrow being shot, still reluctant Shio set up the arrow to mimic the video. She adjusted her aim, targeting the plate and released the hand that was holding the feather.

Propelled by the stretched string, the arrow vigorously launched forward penetrating the target——.....no such thing. Instead it flew only few meters ahead and hit the ground.

"...well, something like that."

Although Shio tilted her neck, Taiga thought it was an obvious result.

There wasn't enough force put into pulling the arrow, even if the aim was good. But it wouldn't fly far, it was surprising it flew that much.

I thought it would immediately fall down... it seems like there's support.

Enemies were monsters, a target that was moving around.

Perhaps for people like Shio right now, who can't hit the stationary target there is a system that augments the flying distance of the arrows and allows anyone to handle a bow easily with little practice.

"Shio, put more strength into your arm as you pull it, it won't fly otherwise."

"Even if you say that, I'm not that strong..."

"No such thing. It might be true in the real world, but this is Elysion(Cyber World). The muscle strength required is minimal and everything else is provided, as long as you have a clear image you'll be able to do anything."

Taiga remembered his conversation with Rui the night before.

——Then can a girl who is as weak as Fuyuki play it?

——No problem. If original physical strength doesn't reach the average value, it's automatically corrected. It's improved to the level of an average highschooler or so.

"To have your arrow fly straight you need an image in your head. If you do that, you will be able to tell how much strength is required, it's easy to sense it. And then, well, just believe. Believe in the fact that you can do it."

"Believing might be the hardest but... I'll try."

Shio created another arrow, slowly took a deep breath and made a proper posture. And then——

"Fuu!"

After a short pause, she shot it.

Unlike the weakly flying arrow from earlier, the arrow flew at a fast pace. But the aim was off and it hit the ground like the previous one.

"A pity. If your aim didn't go off the moment you shoot, it would've hit."

"...it looks like it's impossible for me after all."

He thought that for a while, but rather than Shio being mentally weak, it was her evaluating herself too low.

That was what caused her to fail, a negative spiral that further made her lose confidence.

We have to change that first I guess.

Fortunately, Taiga was a pro when it came to handling weapons. He could teach her a lot.

"Then, the next opponent will be a monster."

"Eh? And what about that target?"

"We leave it. When you're targeted by a monster it won't be just standing in place."

"B-but suddenly real combat is..."

"It's all right, it'll be fine. It was the same for me. The monster over here is disgusting so if you don't defeat it before it approaches you, something horrible is going to happen you know~?"

"Awawa... s-stop!! Let me rest for a moment——"

"There's no need for that. Now, let's go——!"

Taiga took Shio's hand and pulled her to the forest.

Part 3

At about the same time as Taiga and Shio proceeded through 《Aries》.

On the terrace of a Café near New City's main station were the figures of Rui and Fuyuki.

"Yahaa— as usual, the sandwiches here are really delicious——"

It was slightly late to call it a breakfast since it was nine o'clock. While Rui was wearing a perfectly coordinated outfit with a high amount of exposure and ate lightly, Fuyuki was eating like a hamster, taking small bites.

"Fuyuki, aren't you hungry? That's no good~ you need to eat breakfast properly."

"...it's about time you said what's the purpose of this. Why did you bring little sister outside?"

"Nn? That's because we haven't played together just the two of us lately you know? Lately Taiga's been with us the entire time."

Rui gave her an answer with a blank expression causing Fuyuki to sigh. At a single glance it was clear she was plotting something, considering the way her brother acted in home it seemed like he was part of it too.

Seriously, what a meddlesome pair.

It seemed like she really made them worry.

"I understand. I'll take that as the truth for now. Do you have anything planned?"

"Fooling around until sunset, that is all!"

"In other words 'no plan' is it."

Fuyuki was amazed by her best friend's haphazard declaration.

"Well, it's not like I don't have a plan at all? I thought I could pick some clothes for Fuyuki."

"Clothes... is it?"

"Yup. Fuyuki has a lot of similar clothes right? You need some variation when it comes to clothes!"

"Little sister already told you before, that she's not familiar with something like that."

To be precise, she didn't have a need to worry about clothes up until now.

She was alone in a small laboratory, immersed in work every day. She was fine with any clothes. The only clothes she owned were the ones she took

from home when she ran away, she knew nothing about fashion and trends.

"It's a shame because you're so cute. For girls, fashion is a weapon you know?"

"Haa... a weapon."

"That's right. And it's not just to appeal to boys, it's also important to care about it when among girls. Fuyuki looks good no matter what she wears, think about it. Don't you think if you were to wear the same clothes you usually do when going on a date with Taiga, there would be no freshness?"

"Muu... that might be right."

As expected, when her brother name was mentioned she could no longer ignore it.

Because she had a date promised before the Grim Reaper incident last week, it wouldn't hurt to pick some battle clothes now.

"Then it's decided. Let's go at once!"

"I appreciate it, but is that fine with Rucchan? Isn't Rucchan a rival that competes with me for Brother?"

Just like Fuyuki, Rui was also attracted to Taiga. That's what she herself had declared last week.

Since they were competing with each other, she didn't expect Rui to cheer her on actively——

"Nn〜 before being my rival, Fuyuki is my friend. And if my friend wants to look cute for a person she likes, I'll gladly help her."

Hearing Rui say such a thing with a big smile, Fuyuki sighed once again.

"Haa. That's right, Rucchan is that kind of person."

"That's the person I am. Come on, eat up and let's go〜"

The two girls resumed their breakfast while basked in warm sunlight.

"You shot down 73 of them, are you used to it yet?"

"...if that's all I do I'll get used to it even if I don't want to."

On the other hand, the two inside Elysion(Cyber World) finally left the forest.

He left the countless monsters they encountered along the way (or rather lured them at her) to the silver-haired girl and as a result, her skill with a bow improved in a short while. Since Shio's opponents were all disgusting monsters, her mood worsened significantly.

She got used to moving in cyber world and was able to defeat the enemies they encountered with room to spare.

Then after an hour of walking through the forest the two finally reached the exit.

"Why is there a gate at the forest's exit?"

"No idea. It's probably the creator's hobby. Even so, it is a ridiculously huge gate."

The two of them stopped by the forest's exit and looked up the huge gate. Ahead of them was a cliff, and there was no other route that could be used.

And, as the two of them waited, a large window emerged in front of the gate.

〈"『Forest of Silence』 completed, congratulations. If you proceed, the tutorial will be finished. If you journey to a new location, adjusting your equipment will be left to your own discretion and you're free to do as you please."〉

As the voice message finished, the heavy gate slowly opened.

〈"Now then, please enjoy your second life in 《Aries》."〉

Beyond the door there was only light. It simply seemed 'fantasy-like'.

"...shall we go?"

"...yes."

They looked at each other and took a step towards the light at the same time.

〈"——Move"〉

Immediately after that he experienced something he felt many times before, it was as if his entire body was being twisted.

When they were able to distinguish colours again, rather than being surrounded by lush and dense forest vegetation, they were right in the middle of a city crowded by people.

"Waa〜"

Unconsciously, Shio raised a voice of admiration. Taiga reacted similarly in the past, he looked at the unfolding spectacle with a surprised expression.

It was a strange place completely different from cities in the real world.

The first thing that entered their vision was the abundance of nature. There were rivers running throughout the entire city, non-existing in reality, trees that emitted seven colours of light arranged all over. The buildings were fitting for the world, and were fashionably build out of stone.

In the square where the two were, there was a fountain that ejected water high up in the air, giving birth to an arched rainbow. On top of it, there were several people.

It was a town filled with fantasy.

"...I thought I wasn't into fantasy settings but this is somewhat extraordinary."

Taiga muttered, overwhelmed by the sight of the city.

As he looked up, there was a huge rock floating in the sky and there was a spiral that connected to the building on top of it. Unconsciously he thought that it went beyond common sense.

It seemed to be quite a big city, according to the map he expanded from his terminal they seemed to be in the city's centre. On the upper corner of the map there was it's name written, 《Central District, Central Kadora》.

And with that, a single question appeared.

"So, what do I do now?"

According to the announcement at the gate, the tutorial was already over. There will be no more guidance.

"It said 'do as you please' is what it said but..."

"Let's catch someone and ask. Wait a moment."

The two beginners couldn't make any progress alone.

Since it was impossible for Shio who was scared of strangers, Taiga told her to wait and after choosing a person he started to gather information.

On the other hand, Shio who was waiting for Taiga was looking around.

What entered her field of view were objects made with transparent ores and trees glowing in seven different colours, they were things that didn't exist in the real world.

But they weren't the only thing that caught Shio's attention. Even ordinary boulevards bustling with people and the noisy atmosphere were the first experience for her, who was always confined in the mansion.

"There's a lot of people here... I wonder if all cities are like that."

From the middle of the main street, Shio continued to look at the city around her.

With her pure white skin and revealing clothes Shio stood out. But she was carried away by the sight of the city and didn't care about her surroundings.

That's why she didn't notice people that started to stare at her, that was also why she wasn't aware of people flocking to her.

"Eh, what is it...——ah!!"

Absorbed while looking forward at a huge tower in the distance, Shio took a step forward and collided with a man next to her who wore black clothes on his entire body. She fell on her butt and immediately tried to apologize——

"...to stand in my way, what a foolish little girl."

Hearing the man's words, her heart groaned.

It was just an accident. It was just a little incident that should have ended with a single apology.

But the man's eyes, they looked down on her as if she was an insect, those pupils roused memories from depths of her heart.

"Aaa...aa..."

——Why are you so incompetent.

The words her father said to her while having the same look in his eyes, haunted her in the form of auditory hallucinations.

"A bow from the initial equipment... hmph, a newbie. Weak small fries like you shouldn't tempt fate and watch how you walk. You're an eyesore."

The man's attitude was abnormally overbearing. He thought of himself as absolute.

As she heard more of his offensive speech and attitude, the more her emotional scars opened.

The surrounding people were just looking at it from a distance.

"Hey, look that guy's the A-rank..."

"Yeah, it's Tokuma... better not to get involved, let's go."

And with that, none dared to meddle between the two of them.

The ranting man who was standing in front of terrified Shio clicked his tongue.

"...tch. Hey, are you listening——"

"Yes, that's enough."

The man extended his hand towards Shio, and then Taiga grabbed his hand and entered separating them.

"Who the fuck are you."

"I'm with this girl. This is enough. You're going too far, she only bumped into you."

Taiga released his hand and crouched. He sandwiched Shio's cheeks between his two hands as she repeated "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." with an empty look in her eyes and made an eye contact.

"Shio, look over here. ——Shio!"

"...O...Onii...-san...?"

"Are you all right? Come on, stand up."

As he gradually raised the volume of his voice, Shio's eyes finally noticed Taiga. And as he attempted to take her hand to help her rise, the rude man reached towards her again.

"Wait, that woman still has to——ghu?!"

"——Cut it out you bastard."

Taiga grabbed his hand again and squeezed it with enough force to crush his wrist.

He cast him a glare, releasing his caged blood lust causing the man to unconsciously step backwards. And when the man noticed that fact, his expression turned furious.

"You bastards... mere insects like you think you can stand against me!"

The man shook off Taiga's hand and put it on a sword he had by his waist. At the same time Taiga placed his hand on the nodachi. That's when a man came out from the audience.

"Leave it at that, Tokuma. If you pull out a sword in the city, even if you're an A-rank I won't remain silent. Babel is close too, should I call someone from the management?"

"...tch!"

After hearing those words, the man called Tokuma clicked his tongue and walked away after giving Taiga and Shio a dreadful glare.

After Tokuma disappeared in the crowd, the man whispered to Taiga.

"The two of you stand out too much. It's better if you leave as soon as possible."

"...looks like it."

Wondering what happened, people started to gather around them. It didn't seem like things would settle down like that.

Taiga said his thanks to the man, took Shio's hand and quickly left the spot.

After walking through the main street for five minutes they entered a small passage, and finally caught a breath.

"You should be able to calm down here, right...? Shio, are you all right?"

"Y-yes... thank you, Onii-san."

As Shio fixed her breathing, Taiga thought about the previous incident.

The man from before, he was called Tokuma... an A-ranker, he's also a qualification holder isn't he. He had a seriously screwed-up personality.

One of the strongest guys in the Aries, there was only a hundred of them among the players. A player that's allowed to go on suppression missions against viruses—that's a qualification holder.

"His arrogance probably comes from that..."

"? Onii-san, what do you mean by that?"

"That Tokuma guy, he thinks he can bully weaker people just because he's strong. Seriously, to think that's the reason he acts so bossy. How ridiculous."

A brute that immersed himself in the sense of superiority in his small world—there were people like that in Renjou as well. To think there were people like that in this game.

"...isn't that normal?"

Suddenly, Shio muttered that.

"Mm? What did you say?"

"——Isn't it obvious that weak people are going to be treaded upon? At least for me, it reminded me of Hime-chan."

Hidden in those words was a strong feeling contradicting her tone.

What kind of past did she have to be able to say words like that. As if it was an absolute truth, Shio stared at Taiga with a cold look in her eyes.

Taiga was at a loss, not knowing how to answer.

Those words were definitely related to the problem between Shio and Fuyuki. That's why he couldn't find an appropriate answer. He fixed his breathing, and just when he attempted to answer Shio,

That's when a ringtone was emitted from his terminal. The callers name was——Kiritou Haya.

"What now, at a time like this... Shio, go towards that big tower over there. I'll catch up soon."

"That spiral tower?"

"Yeah. That's where you can go through rank-up procedure. So go ahead and leave me for a moment."

"Okay, I got it."

With that said, Shio started walking towards the giant tower that was piercing the sky. He sent her off and didn't try to hide his displeased look as he accepted the call.

"Yes yes, Tenryo here——"

〈"You're slow!! Pick it up faster!!"〉

That moment, he thought his eardrums died.

〈"When you see it's a call from me you should answer immediately!! I don't have time to spare——Taiga, why are you blocking your ears?"〉

"You ask...why...seriously Haya...don't shout...with your volume...set at max..."

What rushed into his ears was no longer a voice, it was bombardment made with sound. It was probably because it was set to maximum, but the sound exceeded even the Grim Reaper's sonic attack and it still resounded in his bones, his visibility shook as well.

"Ah—shit... a sound this loud completely stunned me..."

"...are you all right?"

Taiga stood up while ignoring the sound still ringing in his head and looked at the window displaying the caller again.

"So, what is it?"

〈"Oh, yeah. Taiga, do you have any time to spare?"〉

"No, there's something I have to do——"

〈"You don't have time? Then find some. Or rather, make some time for me right now."〉

"Isn't that kind of unreasonable?!"

〈"I won't accept a negative answer or complaints. I've stuff piled up and I don't have enough time."〉

Not enough time——after hearing those words he noticed big bear-like circles under Haya's eyes that and that her complexion was worse than before.

"Hey Haya. When was the last time you slept?"

〈"A lot of work has piled up. I don't have time to sleep."〉

She worked both as the school's student council president and as a researcher affiliated with the Kiritou Group. Just that was enough of hard work, but now Haya had more work forced on her. Indeed, she might not have time to sleep.

"...make sure to secure some sleep time. At this rate you'll pass out."

〈"Thanks for your advice. I do have intentions of adjusting it. ——Actually there's work I want you to do that involves Aries."〉

"Is it fine if I do it?"

〈"Even though I said it's work, it's just an investigation. I'll send you details via mail so make sure to check it."〉

"Wait wait. I didn't say I'll do it——"

〈"Ooh. If Taiga takes this off my shoulders, I'll be able to take a break～ But if a certain someone refuses, I'll have to stay up all night again～"〉

"Guh..."

With a proud look on her face that was her specialty, she cut in the middle as Taiga spoke. He was the one who told her to secure some sleep time. If he refused here he would turn out to be a man who's only good at talking.

〈"Then, I leave it to you—♪ "〉

In the end she made a wicked smile right before the window disappeared.

Taiga made a huge sigh. It's been only two weeks since they met, but Haya's insolence was getting worse.

"What am I, an errand boy?"

Originally, the one acting as her helper was the AI · Iora. But it seemed like she was allowed to act freely 'to learn about society'. It was enviable, to be released from that tyrant.

And, another sound came from the terminal. It should be the mail Haya spoke about earlier.

"Umm... and the content is... what's this?"

The first word that he noticed after expanding the text was——'Angel'.

He didn't want to read it, but since it was sent to him, he could no longer ignore it. He looked through it reluctantly.

To summarize briefly contents of the job.

For a week now, it seemed like a program of an unknown origin was circling around the structures Kiritou operated. It didn't seem problematic in itself, but it seemed that this program disrupted the game system, it was viewed as a potential danger by Kiritou and they started an investigation.

And the author of the program called himself 'Angel'.

The work was to collect information on 'Angel'. The program was scattered all over the structures, and Taiga was in charge of 《Aries》, or so it seemed.

This work, it seems like something an underling would do...

He didn't know whether it was forced on her or she picked it by herself, but it seemed like she couldn't be picky with her jobs.

"...I'll ask while I'm touring around with Shio. Even so, 『Angel』 eh. That's just like the Grim Reaper, it seems like this world is full of stories like that."

He murmured that happily, and started to walk towards the spiral.

——A huge tower located in the middle of 《Aries》, 《The management tower》 known as 《Babel》. It was a facility players often use, the only place you can access the management from within structure. This was the

place the rank-ups were performed and also the place where you could buy attack-configured programs, it was possible to perform various procedures inside.

"Welcome to the management tower. How can I help you?"

When Taiga stepped into the tower's interior, one of the women standing at the entrance called out to him.

She had green hair that nearly reached the ground and was very beautiful. There were ten women with cold smiles on their faces, no, to be exact there were ten bodies.

AI...MR-7 was it?

It seemed like that was how Fuyuki called them. Although it was a humanoid drone with mechanical body at that time. It could do both housework and office work, it was used for a variety of chores and matters such as reception, it seemed to be used in many areas.

"A person should have been here a while ago. Her name was Shio, she probably wanted a rank-up."

"Please wait a moment, the person in question was directed to the thirty-third practice field after finishing the procedure. If it pleases you, shall I guide you?"

"Please."

Taiga followed the AI that went ahead and began to climb the spiral staircase.

There was free space on every floor, they were places the players used to chat. The further he went the amount of players increased.

"What is up there?"

"The Arena is located on the top floor. It's a place where players can compete against each other under the variety of conditions, anyone can participate."

"An arena... I'll go and take a look after I collect some information."

After a few minutes, he arrived in front of the door that was marked with number 33, the female AI bowed and left. Taiga opened the door and heard a noise of something cutting through the air coming from inside.

He recognized the sound of an arrow.

The released arrow hit the centre of the target located twenty metres away and exploded with a small popping sound.

"You've improved a lot. It's completely different from when you first entered."

As he called out, Shio trembled for a moment and then slowly looked behind. It might have been because of the conversation before, but she had a dark expression.

"...the performance augmentation was improved because I became a D-rank, that's all. It's not a real strength."

"Not all of it is fake. Shio's aim is improving right?"

"...is...that so... Did Onii-san rank up as well? The condition is to break through that forest and come to the city, so did Onii-san also become a D-rank?"

"No, I want to stay as I am for now."

I would become weaker instead——is what he refrained himself from saying.

For Taiga who had an abnormal physical ability far beyond a normal person's, the system that was augmenting players ability would bring the opposite effect. If his nerve connections were disconnecting after he got serious as an E rank, that meant there was no point in increasing it.

"Then, we're going outside already?"

"About that, there's a place I want to visit. Do you mind if we take a detour?"

"Since you've been helping me out this entire time I don't mind it at all. Ah, but it'll be lunchtime soon."

"Then we can take a break. Let's meet here in an hour."

Taiga opened the window to start the log-out process. What should I eat— as he thought of Master's cuisine, he heard a faint voice.

"...don't you want to know about my and Hime-chan's relationship?"

A quiet, barely audible murmur.

He knew Shio would eventually ask that question, Taiga answered quietly.

"I've told you at the beginning right. I won't ask you about it. It's something between you and her, that's something the two of you need to solve amongst each other... am I wrong?"

"...there's no need to solve anything... nothing at all."

After saying that, Shio returned to the real world.

"...looks like it won't be easy."

Taiga who was left behind sighed in secret, and followed her logging out as well.

References

1. [↑](#) He says here "let's challenge" in English.

Chapter 3 – Resolution to confront the past

Part 1

"Fuu..."

Inside of a dim room from which light had already disappeared from, Shio slowly opened her eyes.

Her mind was still agitated after she experienced an entertainment structure(MMO) for the first time, smouldering heat was leaving her body and she took deep breaths repeatedly.

Shio waved her arms lightly to clear her thinking. In conjunction with her movements the lights were turned on, at the same time the Arclight was turned off.

"...I sweated a lot."

Although that was in the Elysion(Cyber World), it was because she wasn't used to moving that much. Her camisole was drenched with sweat, sticking to her skin, and her skin colour could be clearly seen through it. Although she wiped her entire body with the towel she prepared, she still felt discomfort.

I'll take a bath first, then have a lunch.

She was alone in her broad room.

There was an Arclight and a bed, it was a simple room with minimum furniture. That was the place she was living in.

——One corner of the four major cyber-related corporates, 'Karasuba'.

Even if there were people who still didn't know Kiritou's name, there were no people who didn't know the name of Karasuba. That's how large of an enterprise it was. Karasuba Shio was the granddaughter of its company head and the second daughter of its current president.

Unlike Fuyuki who was an adopted daughter using the Karasuba name, she was a daughter descending from a 'Noble Lineage'.

Shio changed into appropriate clothes and draped a coat on her shoulders before she left the room.

Karasuba owned grounds was the size of a small town and her room was inside of the head family's manor.

Through the window there were several visible buildings serving as research facilities and behind those buildings were huge headquarters towering over them.

It wasn't visible from where Shio was looking now, but on the other side there is the reception hall of the internal education facility 《Bird Cage》 and its various facilities that were dispersed.

Partially because it was a holiday, but there were less people in the mansion than usual. Judging from the appearance, Shio was the only one from the head family in there, everyone else there was a servant.

"My lady, Princess Shio is staying at home again... even her other siblings are all at laboratories researching..."

"Master and mistress are going to scold her again..."

Along the way, she heard the servants chatting. Shio shut her heart ignoring the negative chatter.

Aren't they getting bored of repeating the same thing every time...?

Again and again and again and again, that talk continued on a daily basis, these words no longer hurt her but still, somewhere in her heart she felt worn out.

Shio had an older brother, older sister, and a younger sister.

The three siblings besides Shio were already acting as researchers and have attained remarkable achievements—they were being called 'Geniuses'.

Children of Karasuba didn't play like normal children would, they don't attend school. To become people that stand above everyone else, they are subjected to special thorough education from a young age.

They were trained in different subjects. But what was the most important among them was the cyber technology. The only thing that mattered was that they had to have excellent results, that was all.

From a very young age they desperately polished their techniques at the expense of everything else.

———And despite all of that, Shio had no talent at all.

It took her siblings only a week to learn what she had to study for three months. No matter how much effort she put in, she couldn't even see her siblings' backs.

And then, the place 'Karasuba Shio' belonged to slowly faded away.

Shio entered the dressing room, quickly undressed and entered the absurdly huge bathroom.

Her other family members settled on just using the shower, the only one who used the bath on a regular basis was Shio. It turned into a situation where the bathtub was exclusively hers.

Shio Karasuba
鴉羽 紫緒

"Hafuu~"

She relaxed her
body releasing
all her strength,
and floated as the
watery sounds
filled the air.

For just a
moment she felt
an unbearable
weakness no
one knew of.

All the unpleasant
feelings melted
away in the hot
water and her head
became empty—
is how it should
have been.



"Hafuu〜...this is really calming〜"

She soaked in hot water from which white steam rose, and let out a voice.

The warm water was not only pleasant. She also had a sense of freedom no one else knew, it was healing Shio's heart.

She relaxed her body releasing all her strength, and floated as the watery sounds filled the air.

For just a moment Shio felt an unbearable weakness no one knew of. All the unpleasant feelings melted away in the hot water and her head became empty—is how it should have been. That's how it normally was.

...it turned out really weird.

She thought about her first time in 《Aries》, reminded of how she was travelling with the boy who claimed to be Fuyuki's brother.

Even now when she closed her eyes she was reminded of the feeling she had as she released an arrow from her bow, she recalled the sight of arrows flying straight and penetrating through monsters.

It was supposed to be a way to kill time. She obtained a free pass by chance (or rather it was forced on her). She didn't throw it away because it would be a waste, that's all.

But because of that whim, she was reunited with a friend from her past.

I wonder if that was fate...

Even though the hot water should have warmed her up, her heart was cold.

She wanted to ignore all of these feelings, but she couldn't get accustomed to pain that easily.

The pain she felt in her heart seven years ago as her dreams and hopes were all shattered, it encroached her body slowly, like poison.

Ever since then she didn't expect anything, she wasn't entertained by anything, she just lived her life while remaining idle. She thought her own life had no value, that's how it was. However...

...it was fun.

These few hours she spent today were really fun. It was very enjoyable, even though at some point it became as painful as it was when she was betrayed, she still wondered 'What is going to happen next?' with high expectations.

Just a little more, let's continue for a while longer——Shio closed her eyes and entrusted her body to the hot water once again.

Part 2

After an hour passed since the break started, Taiga returned to 《Aries》.

〈"——Log in."〉

An inorganic voice announced, and he opened his eyes. What he saw was the interior of 《Babel》's thirty-third training grounds.

He had a meal in Paradise which as usual, had no other customers. He washed away the sweat and his body was in perfect condition.

Then, he heard the sound of an explosion nearby.

He wondered just how long she had been going at it. Shio was shooting her arrows at the target which was located forty meters away while maintaining a light breathing. Even though there was compensation it was difficult, about 40% of her arrows hit the centre of it.

Despite that, it seemed like she made a steady progress as compared to herself from before the break.

Hey hey... then why did we have an hour long break to rest. There's no point if she doesn't rest is there.

Not noticing that Taiga has logged in, Shio continued to shoot one arrow after another.

She didn't grow as an archer, it wasn't like she grasped it intuitively. Her progress was from the very beginning until the very end a result of her efforts.

Not knowing what to do, and only repeating the same thing over and over again. Standing in the middle of pitch black darkness and exploring everything with touch. A human who only knew how to do it that way, when it came to efficiency she was clumsy it looked as if her thinking circuits were removed.

It's impressive that she was able to improve and reach that level by doing such a thing.

Taiga was shocked, but he didn't hate that kind of thing.

Not having a place for himself, having to be strong to finally get out of there. Without anyone to rely on, unable to ask anyone for guidance——his old self overlapped with her, Taiga couldn't keep watching or leave her alone.

"...Shio, put less strength in from your shoulders."

"Ee...Onii-san?! I'm sorry, is it time already?"

"It's fine, just do it."

He cut in the middle of her apology and prompted her to take the posture.

Panicking Shio tried to pull the string with all her force, she was still stiff.

"You're putting too much strength considering the target is at that distance. Remember the first arrow you hit in the forest. That much strength is enough, what's left is technique. Yes, breathe slowly."

Just as she'd been told, Shio took a very deep breath while holding the arrow. Three times, four times she repeated that and the strength faded from her body.

Taiga continued to instruct her.

"Don't narrow your eyes, like that you won't be able to see the target too well if you burden your eyes too much, your concentration will decrease. Control yourself and your breathing. You must have rhythmic, shallow breathing. If your breath is too deep you will draw out too much strength, and if your breath is too shallow you won't have enough oxygen and your thinking will be blurry. It might be difficult at first, but you should try to keep your breathing as natural as possible."

Shio followed Taiga's instructions and fixed both her breathing and vision.

She only saw the contour of the target that was forty meters away, the dot in the very middle of it was practically invisible. Seeing Shio anxious like that, Taiga continued to speak.

"You don't need any more information about the target. You know roughly how big is it and what its shape is, it's fine if you shoot at it and just adjust

your aim accordingly. What's important right now is to grasp the feeling. Like that you will be able to hit the place you aim at."

"...yes."

"Stop your breathing for a moment right before you release the arrow, it will stop your body from making small movements and help you to retain the aim. However, you can't stop your breathing for too long, if you decide to shoot then go through with it immediately."

Following the rhythm inside her head. Shio aimed her arrow straight. She stopped her breathing for a moment and immediately released the arrow!

clank——the arrow cut through the air and pierced in a place right beside the dot in the centre. Shio unconsciously murmured "I've done it!!", and Taiga saw her happy smile.

"Let's continue. How about we see what will happen if you follow the rhythm?"

"Yup!"

Shio replied vigorously and readied another arrow.

Taiga fixed the parts he felt were bad one by one and eventually when the number of arrows shot reached fifty she was able to hit nearly every arrow near the middle.

Her body has a natural posture, rhythm, just as she was taught. She's a good learner.

It was the first time he taught someone who perfectly listened to his instructions like that.

Any human would have some kind of habit that would surface to a certain degree, and that habit would upset what he taught them.

But without tendencies of her own, she absorbed Taiga's words like wool. At that pace she would improve in no time.

"Shio, let's stop here. We'll continue with monsters as our opponents."

"Uu... it'll be harder than worms. I wonder If I can do it...?"

"Hitting them isn't that hard. Well, though to get a good aim you need to read an opponent's movements."

The basics don't change, only an additional element is added.

"...oh right. Onii-san, you said you had a place you wanted to go to?"

"Yeah, I've been asked something troublesome of an acquaintance. It's the arena on the top floor.

《Aries' Management Tower》, users call it by a name 'Babel'.

Even with that said, the amount of people who were here to contact management or get a rank-up were at most a hundred. So what were all the other players doing here? Their aim was to visit the top floor of the Babel. On top of the giant rock floating in the sky above the tower was——an 《Arena》.

"So this is the arena."

"The atmosphere is amazing... also, it's noisy."

The moment they entered after speaking with the transfer staff on the top of the spiral staircase, Taiga and Shio were forcibly blown away to the amphitheatre. As two people appeared on the edges of the stage, a loud applause rumbled, it felt like an earthquake.

The 《Arena》 reminded of the Colosseum from the middle ages. However it was inside of the Elysion(Cyber World), so it was not normal.

Placed in the middle of the arena, as if having a leading role was a sparkling, mysterious crystal sphere. It was a projector that reflected several three-dimensional images from nothingness.

Their number was five in total. They were broadcasting battles in real-time in five different locations for each one.

"I might be no good with this..."

"That's true it might be hard for Shio since you're very shy. But what's with this amount of people. Do they have nothing better to do?"

Responding to Taiga's condescending tone Shio put on a wry smile.

The audience that consisted of over five hundred people cheered and taunted as they pleased. Honestly, they were really noisy. It seemed like it was hard on Shio as she was in a state where her legs were unsteady.

"I feel as if I was drunk...auu..."

"Oops. Shio, are you alright?"

He supported Shio's body who almost collapsed onto her knees. At that time, he touched her shoulders that were strangely exposed by the hunter costume.

Whoa... what's this, her skin is too white...

No extra flesh at all and spotless beautiful skin.

So white it seemed like it would melt on touch, so brittle it seemed like it would spill on touch.

After touching her, he saw her in a new light.

"...Onii-san?"

She looked up towards him with slightly red cheeks, it might have been because of the enthusiasm in this place. A drop of red in the middle of pure white, naturally it was her eyes that attracted him with their diabolical charm.

"——!! Come on, let's look for a vacant seat, you can lean on me."

"Yes... thank you, Onii-san."

After unconsciously staring at her in admiration, he looked away in a hurry and started to look for a vacant seat Shio could rest on. With that said, since it was both daytime and a holiday it seemed to be a very busy time so there was no convenient seat they could use.

As Taiga worried about what to do, that's when a man approached.

"Oh, isn't it the two from before! What a coincidence!"

"...?"

A man two, three times older casually spoke to them, Taiga tilted his neck. Wondering, where did I see this guy before?

"Hey hey, did you forget me already? Earlier today, on the main street——"

"...ah! The guy who came in to mediate!"

When they had a dispute with the man called Tokuma, he didn't just stand around and dived in. Because the only thing he was thinking about back then was to calm Shio, he didn't look at his face.

"That's quite a fast reunion."

"Hahaha, this might be destiny. Speaking of which, I still haven't introduced myself. I'm Leon, nice to meet you."

"Leon? A foreigner?"

"Onii-san. It's not a real name. It's a secondary name used in Elysion(Cyber World). It's a temporary name used to hide the real name. It's probably the same for that Tokuma person."

"...in other words, a pseudonym?"

"Hey hey, from what age did you come from that you don't know about the second name?"

Leon was amazed. Unfortunately Taiga didn't have any contact with the cyber world. Since neither Fuyuki nor Rui taught him about it, it was impossible for him to know.

"It's not like there's a reason to hide it. I'm Taiga, nice to meet you."

"Taiga, is it. By the way, that girl appears to be sick, is she alright?"

"This atmosphere doesn't serve her too well. I was trying to find a place for her to sit, but there's none so I'm kinda troubled."

"Then I know a good place. Not only you can sit down there, but it's also quiet unlike this place. If you're fine I can guide you?"

Leon's proposal was like a rescue boat. However, there was a single question.

"...a place like that, where is it?"

"Participants waiting room below. Normally, unrelated people can't use it, but since the clan is not using it now you can stay there until the match ends. Do you know what a clan is?"

"It's an English word for family however... but it doesn't seem to be the case here."

"It's not wrong if you think of it as a kind of group. It's a party of four or more players. I'm the leader of a clan called 《Lion Alliance》. Well, we're a weak clan with only four members. Eh, I ended up talking about unnecessary things. Let me guide you to the waiting room."

As he said that, Leon passed through the audience and headed towards the stairs installed near the outer wall. Taiga determined that having Shio get some rest was top priority, he placed his arms around Shio and picked her up before following Leon.

"O-Onii-san! I can walk by myself!"

"What are you saying, didn't you fall down. Just a little longer so don't make a fuss and bear with it. By the way Shio, you're way too light, you should eat more meat."

"Uu...stupid Onii-san..."

Probably embarrassed, Shio's face was dyed scarlet and she lowered her head. Taiga, surprised by how light her body was held in his arms, felt like dropping her would be unforgivable.

They walked through a corridor located below the audience seats until Leon stopped his feet.

"We're here, this is our waiting room."

Guided by Leon they arrived and entered a simple room.

There was a projecting sphere just like the one in the field's center and it was surrounded by chairs. Taiga helped Shio to sit down and bowed his head to Leon.

"Sorry, you saved me."

"Thank you, Leon-san."

"Don't mention it. ...but why did you come to the Arena? Let me tell you first, fights here are too hard for beginners alright?"

"I didn't come here to participate. I've been asked to investigate something by a tyrannical ojou-sama. I just thought I would find something in a place full of people."

The fact that Kiritou was involved was the most he could say, he shouldn't talk about his connections any more than that. Especially not in a place where people might have some information.

"Is that so. By the way, what are you investigating?"

"It's about a guy called 『Angel』 who appeared recently."

"Yeah. Something about bestowing whatever we wish for. Or something..."

"You know something?"

"Just from the rumours. I never saw him myself."

"That's fine. Just tell me."

"Sure thing. First——uh, wait a second. Leon speaking..."

It seemed like he had a call, Leon started to talk after turning his back to the two.

As the room became silent, Taiga glanced to check on Shio's state. It seemed like she settled down quite a bit, her cheeks weren't as red as before either.

"You look better now."

"Yup, it's all thanks to Onii-san. What's the 『Angel』 you mentioned before?"

"A guy who's said to have scattered around a strange program. I am supposed to investigate why he did that. ...that Haya, forcing people to work. She better rest properly."

"...eh?"

Hearing Taiga speak Shio tilted her head, she felt like she knew the name he just spoke.

"Must be a different person, right?"

She got curious and asked honestly.

"By Haya, do you mean Kiritou Haya-san?"

"What, you know her? Oh right, you're both children from the four major corporates. You must be acquainted."

"We just exchanged greetings once at a party. Oh right. The one who's given me a free pass and recommended 《Aries》 was Haya-san, she said her acquaintance uses it..."

"That's definitely about me. In other words, what? The reason Shio came to 《Aries》, was because of me?"

What a coincidence, no, it was inevitable.

The fact that Taiga and Shio met in 《Aries》 might have been fate.

"That's really surprising... but a party eh. Seems like Shio participates in such a thing as well."

"Nnn. It was the first time in a while since I participated in one. That's because a drop-out like me is just a nuisance at home."

For Karasuba she was only a disposable tool. Also, a tool of little value—that's what Shio seriously thought.

Ever since her parents said 'That girl only has good looks so let's have her marry as fast as possible'—she learned just how much a person called Karasuba Shio was worth, she was now only a 'Tool for political marriage'.

Taiga wanted to say 'be more confident' but he swallowed those words. That wasn't what he should be saying now.

No matter what, that seems way too irresponsible...

Because he didn't know anything about her past.

"HA?! W-wait a minute! You, don't you know how important this day is?!"

Then, Leon who was talking in the corner of the room suddenly raised his voice in panic. The atmosphere for the conversation disappeared, the two looked at each other.

"You didn't know... didn't I fucking tell you that before?! The clan matches are for four people, if even one person is missing—Wait, I said wait, hey!?"

It seemed like the caller suddenly disconnected, and Leon's voice resounded throughout the room not reaching him.

"Leon-san, what happened?"

"Seems like it's something troublesome... hey, Leon! What is it?"

"...last minute cancellation."

"Ha?"

"Today's match, we aren't able to participate without four members and as it suddenly turns out one member can't come... even though it was determined there will be a match a month ago."

Seeing him fall into a slump like that, it seemed like he really looked forward to today's game.

"Can't you ask someone else to stand in?"

"《Lion Alliance》 is a clan that has only four members, we don't have any substitutes. And there's no time to look for one——"

That's when Leon stopped talking, and his line of sight was cast towards Taiga.

Taiga had a bad premonition, he wanted to take Shio and leave the room but——

"I beg you Taiga! Participate in the game instead!"

"...it turned out like this after all."

He was a bit too slow.

"There's no one else but you! Hey, I beg you!"

"You're the one who said it'll be too hard for me. What are you doing, inviting me after saying that?"

"Just this time we can overlook it! Anyone who can increase the head count is fine!"

"Hey hey..."

No matter what, that's suiting himself too much.

"Is it fine even if we lose?"

"Since we're participating we have no intention to lose! Rather than admit defeat without fighting, I'd rather participate with a handicap! Of course, I

won't tell you to do it for free. If you participate, then me and my acquaintances will collect information about 『Angel』 !"

"...mm."

Because of that condition, his resolve started to falter.

For Taiga himself there was no profit from it, however there could be some for that scheming young lady. If he continued to collect information at this rate and took too much time, he would be showered by a barrage of insults.

Moreover, Leon not only helped them in the morning, but Taiga was also indebted to him for lending a room for Shio to rest in. He would feel horrible if he were to decline.

Also, it's not like he didn't have any interest in PvP.

"...tell me more details."

"You'll participate?!"

"For the time being, explain everything to me. If it's too weird, I'm not going out there."

Even if he was pulled in by Leon for numbers, he had no intention of pulling his punches. That's why he wanted to know if he will be useful before agreeing to it.

"If you want specifics... I can't explain it to you because I don't know them myself yet."

"Hey hey..."

Not knowing why he didn't know the contents of the game despite being a participant, Taiga was shocked. But it seemed like Leon had a good reason for that.

"Don't jump to conclusions. It's not just us. None of the participants know the content of the game until the start is signalled. That's the real thrill of 《UNKNOWN》."

According to Leon's explanation.

Participants don't know the rules until the very last moment. Rules are different every time, in some cases the rules upset them greatly—it was held only once a month. Arena's most popular event the 《UNKNOWN》.

"The registration will be over soon, and they will announce the rules for the first time. Also, there was a special rule that was changed from the old 『Rank Bonus Reversal』 to 『Movement Speed』 whatever it means."

"Fuun... and the number of participants?"

"This time it's ten groups of four people, so a total of forty. Victory conditions sometimes change, but usually its defeating all other groups besides your own. It's really simple, I'll take care of all last minute details."

While saying that, Leon deployed a window and sent it over to Taiga.

Among all that was written there, the thing that made Taiga curious was a sentence that stood out since it was written in red.

"So what's the prize for winning this?"

"An update program for attack-configured programs. It seems to drastically power up a weapon. The rewards for participating now seem to be really great this time."

"Hee..."

With these words, Taiga glanced at Shio. She was resting while sitting on a chair and looking curiously at the projection sphere floating in the middle of the room.

"Let me confirm one thing. Even if we lose you will help me to collect information right?"

"I promise you that."

"Then I'll participate."

"Yeah!! Then right now it's most important to send the party application to other members! I'm going to explain the circumstances to the other members now!"

After saying just that Leon turned into an incredibly hurried state, he immediately expanded a window in front of Taiga.

〈"A party request has been filed by player Leon. Do you accept it?"〉

Taiga tapped YES, his name was added to the Leon's and the other two members names that appeared. Taiga seemed to have become a member of their party.

"In that case Shio, can you wait for a while? I'll end it in a flash and come back."

"Y-yes. That's fine but... Onii-san, are you really participating?"

"It seems interesting. Is Shio against it?"

"...beginners like us will be only tread upon by the strong people."

Again. Those eyes again.

Trusting in those words as if it was an absolute truth, eyes of someone whose heart was crushed. Not attempting to deny or struggle against it——eyes of a human who lost all hope after confronting reality.

"You won't win anyway, so it's better not to participate at all. The one who will be laughed at after losing won't be Leon-san, but Onii-san right? ...no matter how hard you try, you can't win against someone who has a starting line ahead of you right from the beginning. That's what I think."

For some reason, in Shio's words Taiga heard a heartbreaking cry asking why does it have to be so.

He couldn't agree to it——that's what he thought instinctively.

"I won't be able to win against higher-ranked people, eh. ...then if I win this match, that would prove that Shio's thinking is wrong. Alright! I've got some motivation now!"

"...I'm telling you it's impossible."

"In that case, let's have a bet?"

"A bet?"

"Yeah. Shio will bet that I'm going to lose. I say it'll be just the opposite. The loser is going to do one thing the winner requests of him——how's that?"

Although Shio looked up at Taiga to find his real intention, but she couldn't read his thoughts that easily. She gave up after a moment and reluctantly agreed with a sigh.

"Fine. I'm in. Since Onii-san will lose anyway."

"Is that so. Then, just look at it from there."

Leaving behind the girl who closed her mouth with her head down, Taiga left the place. He felt slightly guilty.

I feel as if I've cheated her... but this time it couldn't be helped.

Taiga might have been an E-rank, but his strength was that of an A rank or higher. He worked together with Fuyuki and Rui at subjugating viruses after all. Other users should be no match for him.

At the end of the corridor the waiting rooms were located at, was the standby room in which nearly forty players have already gathered. In one of the corners were the members of 《Lion Alliance》.

"Oh, you're here Taiga. Are you prepared?"

"Yeah. I found a reason to win as well."

Although Leon casually spoke to him, the gazes of the other two were harsh. It looked like they weren't convinced about Taiga's participation. Since an E-ranker suddenly joined, it was an obvious response there was no choice but to show them results.

"It looks like you're fired up, but Taiga is an E-rank and has no chance, as long as the rules aren't too weird you might be able to hide somewhere and survive until the end if you're lucky."

Leon started a meeting together with other members, Taiga clenched his fist and observed the opponents for the time being.

As expected, it was different from reality. He couldn't tell how strong they are just by looking. However, he could tell how familiar they are with fighting. It was just as people said, experience could be seen in its own way.

"This seems like it'll be harder than expected. ...hm?"

Suddenly the participants groaned "Why are they...", after he heard that question he followed their line of sight——there, was a man dressed completely in black.

"Ugh...!!"

The moment Taiga moved his line of sight and turned towards it he found the reason other participants were so noisy.

"Hmph, the sight of weaklings stretching their necks looks as annoying as always."

With such an arrogant face and looking down on others, it wasn't a face Taiga would ever forget.

It was the A-rank guy they met during the day, his name was Tokuma or something, a qualification holder.

"That guy is participating as well... it might turn out troublesome."

He understood just from his atmosphere. He had a tyrannical attitude, but it seemed like he wasn't incompetent. The three members who were together with Tokuma also seemed pretty tough, though not as much as he Tokuma himself.

As Taiga observed Tokuma's line of sight, unexpectedly the standby room's door closed with a loud noise. At the same time, a green crystal appeared near the ceiling. A voice sounded from it.

〈"Everyone, thank you for waiting for so long. Entries of forty participants confirmed, I'm happy to announce the rules of this 《UNKNOWN》. Ten seconds after the rules have been disclosed, you will be automatically transferred to the field."〉

Together with the mechanical announcement, windows appeared in front of the participants.

—— Rules of the 《UNKNOWN》 ——

① Battlefield is 《Sea of Trees》. Battle system is survival.

② Privately owned attack-configured program cannot be used. The only armament available is one scattered around the field. However, if a player takes down ten others alone, he will be granted access to use his privately owned attack-configured program.

③ Damage calculation depends on the rank. However the stats do not change.

④ Damage dealt depends on the body part hit.

".....ha?"

Seeing the contents written, Taiga froze.

It wasn't that he didn't understand the meaning. It was because he understood that his mind froze.

W-what?! Are they rules specifically aimed at me?!

There were several reasons Taiga who was an E rank could demonstrate the power of an A rank or even greater.

First, was the attack-configured program he received from Rui 《Heavenly Sword》. And another was his specs far beyond an ordinary person. With these two elements, Taiga had an offensive power far beyond his rank.

—In other words, with these characteristics of his sealed, Tenryo Taiga became a real, weak E-rank.

"Ah—shit, there are some weird rules this time. How are we supposed to defeat those A-rank guys with these conditions... Taiga, for the time being hide and try to survive. We'll do something about Tokuma."

Leon said something, but Taiga was too stunned after reading the rules and didn't hear him at all.

Soon after, the room was wrapped in blue light and the players were blown away to the battlefield.

Part 3

"Not started yet... even though it said that it'll start soon..."

As the participants were being transferred to the field, Shio was left alone in the waiting room and still looked at the projection sphere floating in the air. Impatient, she moved her feet up and down hitting the ground.

Now that I think of it, I've never seen Onii-san fighting... he taught me how to use the bow, I wonder if he's familiar with that kind of thing?

She lost herself in thought as she waited, and then the projection sphere unexpectedly began to give off a faint glow. Several windows were deployed in the centre of the room, a forest full of huge trees was projected.

〈"3 · 2 · 1——Match Start."〉

When the countdown finished, players appeared throughout the sea of trees.

T-that person... the one called Tokuma, was it... and there's Leon-san over there...

The players armed themselves and started to move one after another. It looked like despite being from one group, they scattered. She confirmed the positions of three 《Lion Alliance》 members, but she couldn't find Taiga.

"I wonder where is Onii-san... waawwa!"

When she tried to get rid of a distracting window, suddenly another small window was expanded. She cautiously checked it, but it seemed like it was a roster of the game participants.

Near the end of the list she found Taiga's name, when she touched it a small piece of the window spread out——what was displayed in front of Shio, was Taiga as he moved.

"...why is he kneeling down?"

Shio tilted her neck.

Despite the fact the game has just began, Taiga's figure was down on his knees, collapsed on the spot.

《Sea of Trees》.

Just as it's name implied, it looked like a sea of trees towering overhead. Each of the giant trees' branch was as thick as a train, and intertwined they created a three dimensional structure.

And another characteristic standing out more than anything else, was a number of weapons stuck here and there.

But even without looking at them, Taiga dropped down.

Just how bad is my luck...

When he wanted to win, suddenly he got hit by the worst rules——amazed by his own horrible luck he tried to check the rules once again to make sure. But of course, there was no change in what was written there.

When he moved his hand to his hip, there was no nodachi nor its sheath there.

"...what should I do..."

① and ④ were basic rules, he wasn't particularly interested in those. The problems were rules ② and ③.

——Privately owned attack-configured program cannot be used. The only armament available is one randomly arranged at the field——

The 《Heavenly Sword》 that became the cornerstone of his attack power could not be used because of this condition.

When he looked around, he saw weapons stuck here and there. It seemed like he had to fight using those.

Following was ③, damage calculation depends on the rank.

That meant his specs had no effect on his ability to damage his enemies, it meant that his rank was being converted into his attack power. Thus with his body ability a reverse correction was applied. These rules were the worst for Taiga who didn't increase his rank.

Stats do not change. That's my only salvation...

He tried to move his body lightly, but there was no change to his own physical ability. Like this, he could run away. It won't be one-sided situation.

No matter how he broods over it, it can't be helped. With that said, Taiga proceeded to stand up and discerned the sounds around him.

"Okay, there's no one nearby. For the time being let's join Leon and the others."

He didn't want to admit it, but it seemed like it was impossible for him to fight on his own now.

Taiga pulled out a suitable sword that was stuck nearby and began to carefully go deeper into sea of trees where daylight didn't reach. Since the risk of being found by enemies on the ground was high, so he decided on a route on top of the branches above.

He walked and ascertained his prey.

A blade length of about sixty centimetres and about four centimetres wide. It was a sword called 'Broadsword'.

Honestly speaking, he couldn't say he was familiar with this weapon. It's length and weight was significantly different from the nodachi he usually used... or rather, it was a one handed sword that's usually combined with a shield. There was no meaning in using it alone.

Long sword, estoc, spear, axe... there was a lot.

He confirmed various weapons just by walking for a while. But at just a glance he could tell they were all inferior mass produced ones. He didn't know much about attack-configured programs, but they were obviously different from his 《Heavenly Sword》. They were probably all initial equipment.

Although he tried to find and change for a Japanese sword, since he couldn't find it he decided to rush ahead. This 《Sea of Trees》 was broader than he imagined it, he walked for five minutes or more but couldn't find any other player. Meanwhile he looked at the last rule, and the damage calculation in PvP.

"Hmm... damage increases for hits above the neck. Normally it means instant death, but this is virtual reality."

Besides that, it seemed like there was bonus damage for attacks from behind. It seemed also that if arms or legs are cut or crushed to a certain level they are disconnected. Another important thing, there was a set durability for attack-configured programs, if it reaches zero they break.

Let's check the damage for hitting an enemy above the neck first when I enter battle——just when he decided that, he heard footsteps in the front. Taiga erased his presence and moved up the trunk without making any sounds and waited patiently in a position above the enemy.

Before long, Taiga saw the owner of the footsteps——a man who picked up a halberd.

Taiga held his breath and waited patiently for the man to pass beneath him. And the moment he saw his back, he ran down the trunk at top speed attacking his unprotected head from behind!

Got him!

Taiga who completely erased his presence closed the distance like a snake, and cut the unprotected neck with all the momentum.

It was a perfect blow from an ambush that would blow his head off in the real world.

Taiga slipped away and quickly checked the opponent's HP. As expected, instead of being fatal, the damage should be displayed behind his head——

"...ha?"

A light as small as the tip of his small finger appeared on the gauge decreasing it, and his hopes were crushed.

Rather than a 1%, it was more like 0.1%. It was so small it wouldn't be noticed unless you're cautious, it was a really slight change. Not only Taiga, the one who was cutting, but also the person who was cut was taken aback by the amount of damage dealt.

"Umm, was that an attack just now?"

"Yeah, well... seems like it."

What followed it, was this ridiculous exchange of words.

The man tilted his neck while rubbing his carotid artery that was cut. Taiga also made a single step back with an unpleasant feeling, the halberd's tip was lowered——

"...I don't really get it, but let's defeat you for the time being!"

"So it turns out like that after all!"

Taiga avoided the attack with the halberd and made a step forward before cutting the man's body. But the blow had no bonus applied to it so the gauge barely decreased.

Knowing that even if he's struck there will be no damage, the man has thrown away all defence and continued to attack. Taiga showered him with slashes while parrying his attacks, but it was ineffective.

"This is impossible! Just how many times do I have to cut dammit! The guy who thought of this rule better be prepared to hear a mountain of complaints!"

"How about you concentrate instead of talking!"

Taiga complained as the battle continued.

As expected, as it went on not a single enemy attack went through either. No matter how good his defence was, if he dealt no damage there was no point.

This can go on forever——eh, what?!

Just when Taiga honestly thought about escaping, he sprung back after sensing the presence of someone else.

"——OOORAAAAAaaAaaaaa."

A black shadow assaulted his enemy with a large sword and sent him flying with sheer force. The man who was blown away rotated in the air once and somehow managed to rebuilt his posture as he fell to the ground and readied himself again.

"Yoo, you alright Taiga?"

"Leon?!" The one who entered the fight between the two of them was the leader of 《Lion Alliance》 - Leon. Holding a huge two handed sword in one hand, he laughed in front of the enemy.

"Hee— I saw it. You're doing really well! Are you really a novice?"

"For the time being. It's been only two weeks since I started. Rather than that, you've saved me. Sankyu."

"What, it's fine. ——I'll take it from here. Stand back."

If he fought as he was now, he had no chances of winning. Knowing that, Taiga obediently stood back.

Leon thrust his large sword into ground, rotated his shoulders and vigorously hit his fists in front of his chest. *pam* sounded with a nice feel, and his playful expression disappeared.

"Now... let's start this."

Leon vigorously pulled out the large sword, and a ferocious smile reminiscent of a lion appeared on his face.

The man instinctively sensed Leon's intensity, and unlike he was earlier, he took a proper stance as he confronted him.

The halberd was the first one to move, it was a simple therefore fastest attack on Leon's head.

It seemed like normally he was using a similarly shaped weapon, also in Taiga's eyes he was quite good too.

...it's Leon's win.

But, his opponent was the worst.

Leon dodged the fast attack of the halberd, his prey was no match for him. He twisted his entire body and pounded him with the large sword he held in both of his hands.

"——DDARAAAAaaaaa!!

The man set up the halberd to defend instantly, but it was pointless resistance.

With a terrifying momentum the halberd was cleaved in two and continued to cut the man's body, his gauge indicating HP dropped down to 0 all at once. The man began to disappear and turned into particles of light without having time to even raise a voice.

"Splendid. It was a good strike."

Taiga applauded Leon who fought in his stead.

Both his offence and defence were impressive. Even though he thought so ever since he saw him in Arena, but to think he was this good.

"I won't lose to a guy like this. ...also Taiga, I told you to hide right? Rules this time state that rank is directly linked to abilities. It seems like you're pretty good, but being an E-rank you stand no chance."

"Looks like it... are you alone?"

"No, I'm together with comrades. We're going to run a plan after partnering up with another group, you coming with us Taiga?"

"A plan?"

"You saw it as well right? It's a plan to beat that despicable Tokuma."

Leon started walking and prompted him to come as well with his head. Taiga hurried and stood alongside him, and asked about the mentioned plan.

"Partnering with another group, what do you mean?"

"The matches in Arena are made for normal players, people who are A-rank or higher holding qualification don't try to participate. That's because boss battles are more exciting than arena. But even though it's rare, there are some cases when qualification holders participate in the matches for the reward."

Taiga was in fact a qualification holder (or rather his comrade was one), but he thought it's better to remain silent.

"It's the same for those guys. Tokuma is the leader of a clan that consists of A-ranks only. He brought those members of his. He's probably aiming for the prize. Between A-rank and B-rank there's a huge difference in compensation. We can't win this with a group of four A-ranks with rules like these."

"So that's why you teamed up with other groups, in that case, your numbers?"

"Five groups including 《Lion Alliance》, that's twenty people."

"So it's half of the total participants. Considering just numbers, you vastly outnumber four opponents."

"Don't talk nonsense. In fact we had ten more people, but everyone else was taken down by Tokuma and his group. That's why we better hurry, otherwise we're fucked. If he takes down ten players by himself and gains access to his own attack-configured program it'll get out of hand."

Maybe that guy from before was a survivor from that. If that was the case, then they should have recruited him instead——thought Taiga, but it was too late now.

Also, just how much were the A-rankers hated, to make twenty people gang up to beat them.

"I decided to look for you before the operation starts. ...so, let's hurry. According to schedule it should be starting soo——"

That moment, they heard sounds of metal crossing each other a short distance away.

Leon and Taiga looked at each other, and started to run at the same time.

"Taiga you hide! It'll be troubling if you go out in front and die!"

"I can protect my body at the very least!"

"That so! Then do as you want!"

They ran through the forest and jumped from a trunk arriving at the place the sounds came from.

It was the centre of the forest, it was a big space among the huge trees that conspicuously stood out. The plan seemed to have begun, players deployed and surrounded the group of four that included Tokuma and attacked one after another.

"Don't try the impossible you trash...!! Don't bother me!!!"

Tokuma growled with his usual arrogant attitude, his stamina was already down to half. Other members were already at 30% as well. It was obvious at a single glance they were being pressed.

The attacking players repeatedly disengaged after dealing blows as not to suffer from a counterattack, they were gradually shaving off the stamina of the four in the middle. It was a sight that embodied the term 'ganging up'.

"Ah—shit. Seems like I missed everything... isn't it nearly over already."

It was just as Leon said, the battle was already over.

Although they could easily get out from that kind of siege by pressing on one point of it, but it seemed like they lacked the ability to be calm while being pressed to the wall by the underdogs. Unless something unusual occurs, the alliance won't lose here.

The players who formed the siege also thought so, and their movements turned visibly slower.

That stimulated Tokuma's small pride. Going easy on him. The great Tokuma, small fries like them——anger boiled within him from the bottom of his stomach.

And as the offensive relaxed, he noticed something he overlooked.

What he saw, was the boy who underestimated and angered him during the day, and the man who interfered with his revenge. They stood behind as if overlooking their plan at work and in their eyes sympathy could be seen. That was the last blow to him.

Tokuma gripped his sword with all his might—and cut the comrade who was next to him.

"Wha——...!!"

As everyone stood surprised by the fact he suddenly went mad, Tokuma cut down the others. Their stamina that was already at 30% went to zero with a single blow and the three turned into particles of light and disappeared.

"...is he insane?"

Someone murmured.

No matter how much they were cornered, why would someone attack his comrades. He definitely was crazy——

〈"——Defeating ten players alone confirmed. Privately owned attack-configured program has been released."〉

What answered them, was the announcement they heard coming from the sky.

Rule ②—— 『Privately owned attack-configured program cannot be used. The only armament available is one randomly arranged at the field. However, if a player takes down ten opponents alone, he will be granted access to use his privately owned attack-configured program.』 ——
There, was no mention indicating it has to be an enemy.

"This is bad... everyone run away!"

Sensing the danger Leon cried out, the other players still didn't understand the situation and didn't move. Even so, some of them panicked and tried to escape, Tokuma grasped the handle with a brutal smile and pulled it out all at once.

"Now, begin the execution 《Cihuacóatl》 !!!!!!"

Together with his shout, steel howled.

A jet black long sword has been pulled out. It's blade was ominously large and extended with a *gichichichi* sound. It's total length was about twenty metres.



"Disappear!!!!"

Tokuma rotated his body once, and the sword swiped like a wave.

A slash completely ignoring a normal sword's reach, the slash cut apart the players who surrounded him. Every weapon that was raised and on guard was cut through and the players disappeared with a single blow.

"Whip sword...!! He has something like that as his attack-configured program!"

Also called a snake sword, a fictional weapon. As its name implied, it was a whip capable of cutting the opponent.

It's main blade splits up into many smaller blades usually connected by a wire.

It has both the form of a sword and a whip, it's an armament combining both close range and medium-range. In recent years thanks to technology advancement it was no longer a fictional weapon. Still, twenty meters length was non-standard.

"Hyahahahahaaa!! Thought I'll let ya escapee!!?"

Players finally started to run away, but the sword's blade continued to cut them one after another as if it had its own will. It was no longer a fight, it turned into a simple execution.

In only ten seconds. The offensive that numbered twenty people was wiped out leaving only Leon and Taiga.

"...hey hey, seriously?"

The overwhelming difference in strength reached the level of absurd.

pakin, Leon unconsciously stepped back and broke a branch with his foot.

It was too late to say 'what are you doing', the glare was turned towards them.

""———!!""

Taiga jumped at full power avoiding by hair's breadth but Leon was slightly too slow to make an evasive maneuver.

"Guaa!?"

Leon was blown away after the whip sword hit his legs, it's power was increased by centrifugal force.

His HP dropped drastically, there was just 5% remaining. Moreover, the attack didn't end with that. As the 《Cihuacóatl(Snake Woman)》^[1] means as the name implied, the blade whip flowed and wound around Leon's body.

"You're first!!!"

The whip sword bent according to Tokuma's arm movement, gaining momentum and slamming Leon into a big tree. *bang*, with a dull sound as if an iron ball hit the tree, Leon lost his remaining HP, turned into particles of light and faded away.

"Leon!! Damn, no good!"

"It's your turn you damn insecttttttttttttttttt!!!"

Although Taiga jumped up and landed on a trunk, the sword's tip immediately came flying after him.

The sword's tip pierced the location Taiga was just at a moment earlier and broke the trunk that was as thick as a train.

"Uwoooooouahh!?"

After losing his footing Taiga lost his balance as well, and 《Cihuacóatl》 approached him.

He reflexively guarded with the one-handed sword and somehow deflected it. However the fragile weapon shattered and scattered and Taiga was blown away flashily.

"Guhh?! Kahaa——"

His back slammed into a tree trunk and he lost his breath for a moment. Using that opening, 《Cihuacóatl》 approached him mowing down horizontally.

"——Tsuaaa!"

That moment he used all his strength to hit the trunk, thanks to the rebound made by that he was able to avoid the slash.

Taiga fell down in accordance to the laws of gravity and quickly distanced himself disappearing from Tokuma's field of vision.

"Haa...haa...did I manage to lose him...?"

"Where are you hiding!! You're a mere bug so don't bring me any more trouble!!"

Taiga hid himself and fixed his breathing, he glanced through the gap between the trunks. It seems like the furious Tokuma completely lost sight of him and continuously destroyed the trunks with his whip sword.

"I somehow managed to dodge it... looks like my attacks being ineffective is a problem. Moreover, the weapons break after receiving a single blow."

Taiga still had 80% health, but even if he had full health one hit was enough to end him. Also, that whip sword spelled trouble.

Originally it was a weapon that had trouble in complicated terrain like labyrinths. But 《Cihuacóatl》 moved like a snake and avoided obstacles freely. It turned out that it could hit him in blind spots like behind trees.

He couldn't keep on hiding forever, for some reason... he thought the same thing Shio said, 『It's impossible after all』. Geez, even though he intended to win, now it was being ruined by strange rules.

His chances for winning were nearly zero, besides, there was no need to win this match.

However, those eyes, it's hopeless, impossible. Eyes of someone who gave up, they were bothering him so it couldn't be helped.

Why she started to think like that didn't matter, it had nothing to do with it.

However, not being able to admit it——give her a reason to deny that, that much was enough.

"...I'll show her."

Give hope to that twisted girl.

He closed his eyes and exhaled. When he opened his eyes again, he resented himself for thinking like a coward and squinted sharply.

The battle from earlier was replayed in his head, and he memorized Tokuma's habits and combat style, as well as 《Cihuacóatl》's movements

and the positions of the weapons scattered around——he packed all this information and devised the best tactics.

"Now——Let's start the counter-attack."

Taiga pulled out the rapier that was stuck near him, and jumped out from where he was hidden.

He ran as fast as the wind and closed the distance between himself and Tokuma in an instant. However, the enemy was an A-rank, a qualification holder. He wasn't sweet enough to allow him to get in point-blank range that easily.

"Ha, you finally came out!"

Just as he said that the whip sword attacked Taiga from the right side.

To avoid it, using his rapier Taiga dodged by stooping down, and after barely avoiding the sword which flew above him, he hit off the ground and accelerated all at once!

"Wha——!?"

"Got ya!!"

He ran straight like lightning, thrusting at Tokuma's throat. The speed was faster than expected, but Tokuma stood upright and just looked at the strike—and his mouth distorted suspiciously.

Instantly Taiga threw his body to the side.

Instantly Taiga leaped to the side. Right next to him, nearly grazing his cheeks passed 《Cihuacóatl》 that jumped out of a trunk and slashed from above leaving a bruise in the ground.

Taiga Tenryo
天陵 大河

Tokuma
トクマ



"You're mine!!!"

He ran straight like lightning, thrusting at Tokuma's throat. The speed was faster than expected, but Tokuma stood upright and just looked at the strike—and his mouth distorted suspiciously.

Instantly Taiga leaped to the side. Right next to him, nearly grazing his cheeks passed 《Cihuacóatl》 that jumped out of a trunk and slashed from above leaving a bruise in the ground.

"Tch——that's a really nasty weapon!!!"

Taiga cursed and made some distance. However, he was able to confirm it.

His acceleration earlier was out of Tokuma's expectations. It seemed like his sword was able to pinpoint Taiga's location, 《Cihuacóatl》's special ability was tracking the enemy.

The tip of the sword changed trajectory in the air and aimed at Taiga again. With a single blow it destroyed his footing, although Taiga jumped with all his strength towards another trunk, the whip sword approached him from behind.

"ZU....RRAAAAA!!!!!"

He couldn't avoid it while being in mid-air, so Taiga deflected it to the side with the rapier. The whip sword's trajectory was forcefully changed and it destroyed a trunk nearby.

The angle at which he received the slash, timing, adjusting to the power at which it came at its prey—not a single one of those could fail, they were godly feats. But the fragile weapons still broke. He pulled out an axe that was stuck nearby and faced Tokuma again.

Now was the moment of truth. If he's able to lure him to that place without being noticed—the game will be determined.

"All he's been doing up until now was running away! Fight him fair and square!"

"It's boring!"

The alliance formation started by 《Lion Alliance》 that focused on the A-ranks, and the reversal of the situation that was one step away from

succeeding——with this development that made their hands sweat, the storm resolving inside of Arena swelled and approached the climax.

However, at the moment the audience complained seeing the boy continue to run away.

It was obvious. No matter how excited they were, after looking at the same scene for five minutes anyone would get tired of it.

"...that's why I told you, there's no way you can win."

Ever since the game started Shio continued to look at Taiga.

That's why she knew that his attacks are ineffective, and she saw that he was saved and somebody else fought instead of him.

The only participants left were Taiga and Tokuma. The one who wins this duel wins the match.

However the difference between the strength of Taiga who was an E-rank and Tokuma who was an A-rank and was able to use his own attack-configured program was too huge.

The boy on the screen just continued to escape by climbing on top of the huge trees.

"The difference between their powers is absolute. There is no way to win against someone who starts on a different start line."

Shio repeated her own words, speaking to herself.

She was reminded of her own scattered feelings. No matter how much effort you put in, you can't beat talent.

That's why——even if she said 'Wrong'. Or even if she had expectations 'If it's him, then maybe...', she still blamed it all on her own weakness.

The audience's jeering became more intense.

Parrying 《Cihuacóatl》 while continuously changing weapons must've been incredibly difficult——for them, such a thing didn't matter.

"Uuu...aa... uguu..."

Shio hugged her body as if she was in pain.

She knew she couldn't say it to herself. But hearing booing at someone's desperate, hard work. His tremendous effort not even being noticed, it was just like herself who was being repeatedly insulted every single day by her father.

After meeting eyes like his, she felt it's better to give up right from the beginning—that's what she was reminded of.

".....—est....."

She should have understood. In front of an absolute element^[2], something as unstable and brittle like effort had no meaning.

".....—our best....."

She was never praised, not even once. She was always compared to her talented older brother or younger sister, she was one-sidedly labelled as a disappointment, 'Why are you so incompetent!' or so she was continuously blamed.

Even such a girl, no, because she was a girl like that——

"...do your best! Onii-san!!"

She wanted effort to be awarded, more than anyone else.

While Shio cheered, Taiga was finally cornered on top of the huge tree in the centre.

The game was approaching its final stage.

"Fuu... this is pretty high..."

Taiga ran away from 《Cihuacóatl》 and continued to climb the central tree, finally reaching the top. The ground was far away, he judged with his eyes that it was about a hundred metres above the ground. An ordinary person's leg would freeze and he would become unable to move after climbing this high, but Taiga was completely calm.

It should be fine from here right? Though the prey seems a bit uneasy.

In his hand he had a tanto. There were no more weapons in this place, there was no choice but to make do with this one.

"——Hmph. I finally got you cornered. You annoy me way too much for a mere bug."

In the background there was the sound of an explosion.

The last footing was destroyed by the twenty metres long whip sword 《Cihuacóatl》 and Tokuma entered, climbing to the top.

"I remember your face bastard. A mere small fry who dares to look at me with that impertinent look in his eyes..."

"I'm indebted to you for taking care of me back then. Although I wanted to say thanks, but instead I'll crush you with my full strength. Amateur."

twitch, Tokuma's movements stopped.

"You said... amateur?"

"Ah, sorry. A mistaken bastard like you who pretends to be a king in a small world by brandishing fake power isn't even worth being called an amateur."

After Taiga said that, a number of blue veins appeared on Tokuma's head. In response to its owner's anger 《Cihuacóatl》's tip rose up——

"Enough of this... die."

Together with that declaration, the sword's tip shot out like a bullet.

Starting with top speed from the very first step, Taiga rushed at Tokuma thrusting at him.

"Ha, trying the same thing a second time, foolish!"

In response to Tokuma's arm movement, the whip sword changed trajectory.

Swung down from above, then assaulted from below. It gained speed thanks to the centrifugal force——continuously striking one after another a matchless barrage of attacks, Taiga continued to dodge them all by a hair's breadth.

And it wasn't just the tip of the sword. Because the blade was incredibly long it spread out like a wire trap and inhibited movement in this place. However, it didn't hit him.

"You're the one who's foolish. Even a monkey can repeat the same thing over and over."

No matter how complex the motion was , Tenryou Taiga could perfectly track it.

In the first place, the whip sword exhibited its full prowess with a combination of both the whip and sword form.

Tokuma mistook himself as absolute and continued to use the same attacks over and over, he was just third-rate.

"Ghhu...?! You third rate weaklinggg!!!"

Blood rose up to his head, and the whip sword Tokuma was wielding turned into a mess.

In the first place that weapon was hard to wield, it couldn't be manipulated properly by someone who lost his composure, the automatic tracking caused the blade to hit itself and change trajectory.

Not missing that fatal chance, Taiga accelerated.

Even if he attacked with the tanto there would be no damage. Taiga closed the gap between them in one step and grabbed the arm that held the handle of 《Cihuacóatl》 and slammed the back of the gauntlet towards the ground.

Taiga moved at a godspeed his opponent couldn't even register, immediately after Tokuma fell over.

There was no damage but the impact hit his entire body, 《Cihuacóatl》 separated from Tokuma's right hand.

Taiga twisted his entire body and with his full strength he hurled Tokuma into the air where there was no footing. He also jumped aiming above.

"Y-you bastard...!! What are you intending!!!"

"Can't you see? I'm going to drop you. Since you destroyed all the footing you're going straight to the very bottom."

He clenched his left hand and swung with all his might.

When Leon was defeated he confirmed that there was damage upon the impact. When Taiga himself was flicked by 《Cihuacóatl》 there was damage when he hit the truck.

With a fall from the sky a hundred metres above. Maybe he could survive if fully recovered, but thanks to the encircling operation his HP was cut down to nearly 30%.

It can't be this guy... did he lead me around to destroy all the trunks on purpose!?

There was a possibility that his fall might've ended on one of the trunks if they remained. That's why he eliminated all the unnecessary risk by deflecting away 《Cihuacóatl》 towards the trunks which served as scaffolds.

It all went as Taiga intended it. From the very moment he lured him in here, the game was already on.

"A hundred metres to the surface——"

"W-wai——?!"

"Enjoy your trip without breaks bastard!!!!!"

With a fist like an artillery shell, he hit Takuma right in the middle of his face.

Hit by a blow with the strength of a car, Tokuma continued to fall at a tremendous speed. On the other hand, Taiga began to fall but pierced through the tree's trunk with the tanto and started to dangle.

"Ah—I'm tired. Not doing this ever again."

Immediately after he sighed and said that, from the bottom came the sound of a heavy crash.

⟨"——Only one virtual body reaction detected in the area. Match is over, all virtual bodies are going to be immediately deported to the Arena——"⟩

Waiting for Taiga to return to the coliseum were waves of an excited audience.

After all, he overcame the overwhelming difference in power with a brilliant reversal play. Tokuma who took down his comrades by his own hand was branded a villain, ear-breaking cheers welcomed Taiga. Among the audience, there were people who said "I was wrong to call out such a

thing." and apologized, Taiga didn't know what that was about and just tilted his neck.

He received the winning prize which was an update program for attack-configured programs and rushed to the waiting room Shio was in.

"....."

Shio was sitting on a chair and stared at the projection sphere that no longer displayed anything.

"Hey Shio-san, any words of praise for someone who did his best and won?"

"Wawawa. O-Onii-san since when did you?!"

As Taiga reluctantly called out, Shio looked behind with a startled expression. For some reason her breath was rough, her cheeks were red and she had tears in her eyes.

"...Shio?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. Umm, I just got too excited."

Shio tried to deceive him and rubbed her eyes in a hurry. Feeling it's better not to ask for the reason of that, Taiga sat next to her in silence.

"...the bet, it's my win."

"...yes. It's Onii-san's win, and it's my loss."

Somehow, she had a very refreshing smile on her face. Shio looked at the projection sphere that displayed the fight just a moment ago.

"Onii-san is really amazing. Winning against such a strong opponent."

"That's because I took him off guard. As expected, if I fought him from the front I would've lost."

"It might have been so... nevertheless, you perfectly proved your words to be true. You reversed the situation when in an overwhelming disadvantage."

Her heart that decided right from the beginning that it's impossible, her weak self that already gave up, he denied it all head on. Taiga didn't know just how big a hope he has given her.

"...hey, Onii-san."

"What is it?"

"If talent is not absolute... then why did I confine myself in a husk for seven years?"

She learned of talent, and ran away after finding an area she couldn't reach.

She was scared that she won't have any results, afraid that she won't be acknowledged by anyone, of being responsible for her own life, she lived while blaming everything on her friend.

Believing that neither despair nor effort brings any results, she just single-mindedly lived an empty life.

However... if all of her assumptions were wrong right from the beginning, there was no point in running away.

"Plunging myself into despair, arbitrarily giving up on every single thing, was it meaningless?"

"...who knows."

Hearing Shio's heartbreaking cries, Taiga continued.

They were neither words of encouragement nor comfort, they were incredibly realistic words.

"I don't know what happened in Shio's past. That's why I don't know what would have changed if you didn't give up. That's how the reality is. Looking back at the past has no meaning."

He said these words to himself as well.

Always reminded of the past where he survived while leaving his parents to die, 'If only I was stronger back then', he continued to regret. Forgetting it all, discarding it all, it would really put him at ease. If he was able to do it, he wouldn't be having such a hard time.

But, just that—he didn't want to accept such a way of living.

Forgetting his sins, throwing away the fact that his parents died, it would make their deaths meaningless. He wouldn't be able to attain anything

from their deaths, it would just be a tragedy. There would be no salvation anywhere.

There must be a meaning in the fact that Tenryo Taiga survived. Thinking like that allowed him to put in a desperate effort into finding it.

"In the end, finding what Shio wants to do, is your own problem."

"What I want to do..."

Taiga cut off there and didn't say anything else. He told Shio his own feelings and waited patiently.

He conveyed to her what he wanted to convey. From this point, it was all up to her.

And slightly hesitating, she opened mouth slowly.

"...I, I was always jealous of Hime-chan's talent, and that's how I lost my only friend... that's why, I stopped struggling. I blamed it all on talent and wanted to run away. —.....is that, no good?"

"No, isn't it fine? Looking forward instead."

He wondered about it ever since he first met her, eyes that gave up on everything—they were no longer there. Taiga immersed himself in an indescribable sense of accomplishment, and vigorously stood up.

"—Alright! Let's continue our journey! I somehow progressed with Haya's request, and also obtained something good."

"Something good? Ah, you mean the program that was the prize for winning?"

"Indeed. And... here you go."

He materialized a bright orange crystal on the palm of his hand and tossed it towards Shio. Although Shio only reached out to catch it, the crystal smoothly melted like a candy exposed to heat and was sucked into her body.

"Good, the update is complete. It was a good thing I asked Leon how to use it."

"Eh, Onii-san?!"

The prize he received for winning wasn't an attack-configured program, but a program used to strengthen attack-configured programs. Of course, it was possible to use it to enhance his own program as well.

"W-why? Isn't this what Onii-san has won?"

"My own 《Heavenly Sword》 is plenty strong already. It will be more useful, in various ways if Shio has it."

"B-but——"

"Stop. Did you forget the condition for the bet?"

The loser is going to listen to one request of the winner——he took no refusals.

"Rather than that, let's go to the field quickly and try it! According to what Leon said, it's a power-up that boosts the program beyond the level of A-rank, I look forward to seeing it."

"A-awawawa...Onii-san, I can walk on my own so don't pull me?!"

Pulled with her hand by Taiga, Shio jumped out of the waiting room. While looking at the boy who showed her that she had her own potential, Shio thought.

——I'm really happy to continue this journey.

Part 4

——Where there was light, there was also darkness.

As the winner bathed in the light, the loser hid himself in the darkness.

"Shitt... those damn insectss..."

In the corner of a back alley, not exposed to the light, a man walked while cursing endlessly.

He continued to swing the black sword 《Cihuacóatl》 that was usually attached to his waist messily, countless slashes were engraved on the walls and the ground around him.

He should have won.

There were favourable conditions for him, who was already an A rank. On top of that, he used 《Cihuacóatl》. There was not a single element that would make him lose. There was an overwhelming difference between their strength.

——And yet he lost.

It was a perfect defeat where he couldn't even make an excuse. A stigma of defeat he obtained after he sacrificed three of his clan members. As a bonus, his opponent was an E-rank to boot.

Tokuma lost his comrades, the pride of someone strong, and his position. The only thing left there was the hatred towards the one who defeated him.

"I'll cut your body up. Those annoying eyes, I'll engrave the taste of defeat inside of them!!!!"

For that purpose he needed strength. He needed to become more powerful than he is now, so overwhelming that none can reach him.

Seeking absolute power, his heart was going mad with thirst for it.

"——Hmph. Do you want power?"

That's when. In an alley no one should be in.

"...who?"

Tokuma pulled out 《Cihuacóatl》 and pointed it in the direction he heard the voice from.

There, was a strangely dressed woman.

She was wearing a pure white cloak that completely obscured her head, her face aside he couldn't even discern her physique. He speculated she was a woman based on her voice. But it might have been a man with a woman-like voice.

"I'm not anyone suspicious. That's right, if I were to name myself it would be——Angel, maybe?"

"...Angel you say? Ha, I've heard the rumours. A shady user that's said to fulfill wishes."

"Don't misunderstand, the correct answer is that I help people to fulfill their desire but only when 『They are ready to sacrifice anything to have their wish granted』 . I don't grant them to just anyone...however, I think you qualify, am I right?"

The virtual body calling itself angel spread its hands.

That figure blossomed in the dark alley like a pure white flower. But he wondered why.

"Answer me——what do you desire?"

Rather than godly, he had an ominous spine-chilling feeling.

"...ha."

Tokuma laughed at himself for flinching for a moment. Nothing remained for him to lose anyway. In that case——he will use anything and anyone.

"Give me power. Give me an overwhelming power strong enough beat anyone. Absolute power that will make anyone grovel in front of me!!!"

"That's simple. Then I'll give you this program. This will allow you to raise your performance a few times——however, you will feel pain corresponding to it."

"...pain? But this is Elysion(Cyber World)? There's no way——"

"There is. It's just that the virtual body is normally blocking it. This modified virtual body is different. What, there's nothing to worry about. It's virtual reality after all, if you have a strong heart you will withstand it——it's fine if you try it out."

Saying that, the Angel materialized a jet black crystal on the palm of its hand and pushed it inside of Tokuma's body.

The crystal began to destroy his body from the inside, and electromagnetic waves ran through Tokuma's virtual body.

"...nn? A, gh, gy, gGHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!!!!"

Just when he thought that nothing has changed and wanted to question the angel.

What hit Tokuma was severe pain as if all of the nerves in his body were being ripped apart.

He raised a scream that seemed like it will make his throat collapse, but his pain did not subside.

"That's a pretty nice howl. Does it hurt that much?"

"AGAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!! S-STOPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPPP!!!!!!"

Feeling unbearable pain Tokuma begged as tears flowed from his eyes. But Angel looked down on him with cold eyes, as if he was a pebble on the side of the road and shook its head seemingly troubled.

"That's troubling. To think that he would break this early in the experiment. Seriously, people with weak hearts really are small fries. I wanted him to fight that person again to gather data. It can't be helped. Let's try the other candidate."

Once again—the Angel created a black crystal and squeezed Tokuma's head.

"It's a program that causes excessive secretion of adrenaline. You won't be feeling pain now, instead you will feel good. If it's simple orders then you should understand. ...now then, I'll have you play the villain for a while longer."

A beautiful, no, the Angel made a too beautiful of a smile.

There was no evil in it as it looked down on the broken man, its expression wasn't malicious. If someone saw it he would have surely thought.

—Neither frightening nor evil, it was just an empty expression.

"...well then, let's start the experiment."

The Angel murmured and disappeared into darkness.

References

1. ↑ Cihuacóatl means snake woman in Aztec and is a name of a fertility goddess.
2. ↑ could be talent, power or money, just "something"

Chapter 4 – Karasuba Fuyuki and Karasuba Shio

Part 1

——Tracing back to around noon.

"Yahaha... seems like we bought a little too much."

"Where do you see 'little'! I'm clearly over-weight here!"

Around the time Taiga and Shio entered 《Babel》, Fuyuki and Rui returned to 《Paradise》 to eat lunch.

"Little sister is super tired. Don't want to move no more."

"Well that's because we've walked around quite a lot~, though Rui-san could still continue."

"Hmph, that's because little sister doesn't have any stamina."

They shopped in a store that didn't have any customers despite the fact it was a holiday (to be exact 80% of their shopping was done by Rui), they bought things like clothes and bags.

Seeing the amount of things she bought, Master—Saionji Jyugo scowled.

"Rui. It's good that you aren't obsessed about saving money, but I won't forgive being wasteful."

"Uu...umm that's... you know? When I was picking clothes for Fuyuki, I found a lot of things I wanted to buy, see? That's why, umm, overlook it? Dad♪."

"No way. I'm cutting your pocket money for next month."

"Seriously?!"

It was too much of a shock to her, Rui fell down and lying her head on the counter seat, she placed a hand on it. Fuyuki who has bought a lot of things felt somewhat sorry, and apologized to Rui.

"Sorry, Rucchan. Because of little sister..."

"No, it's not Fuyuki's fault. Rui-san got too fired up. That aside, you're hungry right? Hurry up and make an order."

Raising her face in a hurry Rui passed the menu. Although Fuyuki remembered the entire menu, she still properly took it from her best friend.

"Then, a pancake set."

"Okay. Dad, the same thing for me."

Jyugo received the order and immediately begun cooking, while the food was being prepared the two girls checked on their loot.

There's really a lot... the wardrobe is going to expand.

During the time when she was immersed in studies at Karasuba she didn't have suitable clothes for going outside. The clothes she had on herself were the only thing she brought as she ran away from Karasuba.

While Fuyuki was worried about that, Rui not only chose clothes that fit her, but also perfectly coordinated her outfits.

At first Fuyuki was taken aback by how different the clothes were, but when she actually wore them it turned out that they suited her outstandingly. Like usual, Rui's sensitivity was surprising.

It's the same when it comes to cyber technology, Rucchan is amazing at things like this.

If it's just technology, Saionji Rui couldn't win against Tenryo Fuyuki. It wasn't a problem of having or not having a talent. Fuyuki received specialized education in one of four major cyber-related corporations 'Karasuba' while Rui received only general education, they came from way too different environments.

However, Fuyuki could declare with all certainty that when it came to preparing attack-configured programs, Saionji Rui was definitely better than she was.

It wasn't like Fuyuki was bad at making those. She made quite a few of them before, they were better than attack-configured programs that normally circulate, and had a good performance. Still, when compared to the ones Rui made, they were strangely bleak.

What made Fuyuki's and Rui's different, was sensibility.

The basics of programming are in the form of the imagination. Repeating precise calculations aiming for a desired result, bringing it closer to an ideal

little by little. For that there's both a need for computing power and imagination—and with that, sensibility is complete.

Partially because Fuyuki was a researcher before, she tends to focus on efficiency, and cuts down on the wasteful parts as much as possible to derive the best results under limited conditions.

That was also reflected in 《Synchro Infinity》, the program she has written for Taiga.

But Rui was different. The most important thing for her was to make it 'fun'.

In the past, Rui asked Fuyuki "please teach me programming" and received a detailed lecture on the topic.

The basics aside, programming was something to be done very instinctively. When Fuyuki reached the last part and was in doubt, not knowing what she should teach her, when she finally decided to teach her how to make a small structure Rui reacted to it——'Is that any fun?'.

Creating a structure was essential, it wasn't the case of it being fun or unfun——thinking like that Fuyuki taught her, and in the end Rui managed to make a structure, even if it was very small.

The thing that she created was extremely miserable, and when Fuyuki questioned her 'How did it turn out to be something like this?' Rui simply answered her with 'Because it's more interesting like this, right?'.

Fuyuki was surprised by the fact Rui didn't think of it as a failure. Three days later, she created a structure incorporating a fantastic system, moreover it was big enough for a person to move in. It was created with only the knowledge she was taught and while it looked proper at a single glance, it was built by mysteriously connecting various elements.

When it came to capability only, Fuyuki's was far above Rui.

However——Rui had her own distinct sense, and with it Saionji Rui definitely reached the 'genius' realm.

"What is it, Fuyuki? Are the outfits Rui-san coordinated weird?"

Hearing a voice coming from the seat next to hers, Fuyuki's thinking returned back to reality.

"No, all of it is really amazing. ...well, maybe some of them. I wonder what kind of thinking circuitry do you have to come up with such a combination, that's what I would like to know."

"Eh? Didn't you subtly make fun of me there?"

"No way. If anything, then it was praise."

Although some time ago Rui said that she and her brother were weird, but she too could have been categorized as that. That's what Fuyuki thought earlier that day.

"Sorry for the wait, two pancake sets. Eat before they get cold."

It seemed like the food was prepared as they spoke about that, in front of the two were soup in a cup, a pancake and salad lined up. Fuyuki and Rui stopped rummaging in the paper bags filled with clothes, and focused on the food.

"It's delicious as always. Master, if you changed the bar-like interior, some customers might actually come?"

"You really do say horrible things without any hesitation."



Although Fuyuki had an intense fear of strangers, as expected she got used to him after a week. She could speak to her best friend's father, Saionji Jyugo while remaining relatively calm.

"Certainly today's lunch is really good. Also, Rui-san didn't need to help to prepare it either."

"Or rather, how come this business doesn't collapse? Or are you profitable?"

"Ahaha, you know 《Paradise》 is just Dad's obsession〜"

"Saying it's an obsession is too much. I won't deny it is my hobby though."

"That's what you say. But all the fine details are done by Mom."

"...Rui, your allowance cut is extended by a month."

"Eeee?!"

They continued to eat and chat like that for the next twenty minutes, after the meal the two of them enjoyed a cup of Japanese tea——and thought about what to do next——as they relaxed after a meal.

...in the end, we just ended up playing around normally.

Although she felt like she was being approached with something, but Rui didn't say anything.

Fuyuki herself knew very well that she couldn't continue like that——but no matter what, she didn't have the courage to face the past that was catching up to her.

"Speaking of which, Taiga seems to be acting alone? He's been here a while ago to eat."

"Oh, so Taiga came. So he logged out for a while?"

The moment she heard it, Fuyuki reflexively rose up.

She didn't know for how long she's been there. But she needed to hurry up and chase after him, they might meet again if she makes it before he returns from Elysion(Cyber World)——and as she attempted to run out, her arm was grasped.

"...Rucchan?"

"You can't, Fuyuki."

I won't let you go——that's what her eyes relayed, Rui continued to hold onto Fuyuki's arm.

For a moment Fuyuki felt like shaking off her hand, but seeing her serious expression she sat back on the seat.

"Sorry Dad, can we occupy the seats for a while longer?"

"...as long as you get off when a customer comes."

After saying that, Jyugo moved to the back of the kitchen. Rui said 'thank you' in the back of her mind and murmured at the same time before facing Fuyuki again.

"Rucchan, why did you stop me. Little sister only wanted to——"

"Wanted to be pampered by Taiga, right?"

"...yes."

For herself who couldn't go forward, with an unchanged status quo, her heart sought support.

It's not that Saionji Rui didn't support her. Still——she instinctively sought her blood related brother.

"...Fuyuki doesn't know anything. Why a siskon like Taiga went as far as to ask Rui-san to take care of Fuyuki. You really don't know the reason for that do you."

"So Rucchan knows the reason?"

"Although the person himself didn't confirm it. But seeing Fuyuki right now, trying to escape again, I can tell."

These words pierced Fuyuki's heart, she looked away from Rui's stare. If she were to look her in the eyes, she would have no choice but to admit her words.

"...Fuyuki doesn't just want to be pampered by Taiga. What you're facing, you want Taiga to shoulder what you should be shouldering and take care of it for you right? Taiga is kind, there's no way he will refuse Fuyuki. His precious little sister is troubled, so he'll help."

Maybe, she somehow did it unconsciously. Even so——after being apart for eight years Tenryo Fuyuki who suffered from unbearable loneliness turned to rely on her brother with whom she finally reunited with.

"...you mean I shouldn't rely on Brother?"

"Relying on someone is not a bad thing. But, I think pushing someone's back and leaving everything to them is wrong. At least the first step, you need to take that step by yourself. If you leave all of it to others, where is your own will then?"

If Taiga were to tell Fuyuki 'Don't run away', she would face Shio even against her own will. However, there was no worth in such resolution.

Distressed and suffering——and yet still trying to move forward, if the resolution dwelling inside her came from desperation, she would no longer be able to shine. There was no meaning in borrowed resolution.

"Just waiting for Taiga to step in is no good. Though I think that would definitely work. But if you really want to overcome it, you should gather the courage to step out. Right?"

Saying that, Rui reached out to Fuyuki.

Her irreplaceable best friend who's been with her for four years straight.

There was a dazzling confidence in her eyes, she believed in her from the bottom of her heart, Fuyuki was envious of it——but even so, she didn't take her hand.

"...Fuyuki."

"...I'm sorry. But I'm scared. I'm really scared of being denied again, I can't help it..."

She should have forgotten it, it was a memory she should not see ever again.

But the fact that she reunited with Shio reminded her of the past and pained Fuyuki's heart. Her expression that said 'I wish I never met Hime-chan.', her expression that implied her heart was broken, her eyes that looked like she was weeping in despair, they wouldn't leave Fuyuki's head.

To be denied again——thinking of that, she couldn't help but be scared.

"...I see."

Rui didn't know what past the two had, she didn't know because of what Fuyuki was suffering from. But she could tell that Fuyuki continued to live, while continuously suffering from a burden just by looking at how she trembled.

That's why Rui retracted her outstretched hand.

"Alright! Let's play then!"

".....ha?"

"We have two Arclights here, it's been a while since we entered 《Aries》 with just the two of us, come on hold the luggage."

"Eh, wha.. wai... Rucchan?!"

Rui grabbed Fuyuki's hand and led her up the stairs to her home.

The second floor of 《Paradise》 is Saionji's home, it was a place no different from any other normal household. If there had to be one difference pointed out forcefully, it would be the fact that it had no kitchen space.

In the back of their home, was Rui's room.

"Go ahead. It's the first time you enter Rui-san's room right?"

"Yeah..."

While her thinking still couldn't keep up with the sudden turn of events, Fuyuki stepped inside of a room that had a nameplate saying 「RUI」 hanging on it.

If one were to describe it with a single word, it would be a big room.

There were no unified electronic devices like the ones in Tenryo's home's dive room, but the room was filled with various different items. But since it was really tidy, it seemed very spacious despite the amount of items inside.

A basketball, tennis and lacrosse rackets, there's also a guitar. Just how many hobbies does she have.

Probably, anyone who would see this room would think——'just what the hell does this room's owner want to do'.

"You really tried many things. It seemed like you're good at sports but I didn't think you even dabbled in instruments."

"Yahaha... actually I didn't use it all that much. I got bored of it."

Doing anything as long as it's fun at the moment——that's how the girl called Saionji Rui was.

Her parents, especially her mother rooted for her and bought for her whatever she wanted, which might have encouraged such behaviour.

While Fuyuki looked around the room examining various things, Rui began to rummage through the closet.

"Ummm, the spare should be around here... there it is."

Rui pulled out an orthodox headgear-type Arclight from the back of the closet. Even though it was a previous generation machine from which the paint already came off, there was no problems with its functioning. Together with the newest model of Arclight that was on top of the bed, there were two machines.

"It's alright if Fuyuki uses the new one."

"All right. ...it's the first time I'm using a small-type."

At Karasuba she used a large machine, and when they moved in she used the medium-sized machine. Although she had a small one as a spare, she never used it. It was a simple machine that specialized in diving into ElySION(Cyber World), it didn't have any other functions other than that. What everyone was focusing on, was diffusion rate, though those machines were expensive.

Rui installed the older machine next to the bed and hit the bed twice, inviting Fuyuki.

Since the small machines didn't have anything to support the body like the medium-sized and large-sized machines, they needed to lie down during immersion.

"...excuse me then."

Fuyuki got on the bed cautiously and lied down next to Rui.

Because it was the first time for her to lie down with someone of the same sex she was a little nervous. Because it wasn't a twin bed, but a narrow ordinary one, their hands overlapped.

"Let's go then!"

She started the Arclight at Rui's sign, and the two jumped into the paradise of electrons together.

Part 2

〈"——Hee, you did pretty well. You have my praise."〉

"Thanks. Though, it's not me who prepared that."

Around the time when Fuyuki and Rui entered 《Aries》, Taiga and Shio left the central city 《Central Kadora》 and entered a canyon outside of it.

Since monsters appeared, Shio continued to shoot arrows at a good pace taking down crow-like monster with flame-imbued arrows.

After the 《UNKNOWN》 was over Taiga jumped out of the arena and pulled Shio by her hand. But since he didn't know what to do, he returned afterwards to ask Leon.

According to what he said, while players could travel freely, not all places were available for them right from the beginning.

Every area had a fixed boss monster, and players were able to proceed to the next area after defeating him. The moment they are defeated the move point in that place is released and can be used at any time. By the way, players A-ranked or higher who have the qualification, 'subdue viruses by moving from area to area and receive their prize in 《Babel》 afterwards' (and they do it repeatedly). And that's the general behaviour pattern for players.

Since it also served a purpose of trying out Shio's new attack-configured program, they chose a valley area with many flying enemies around. Since Taiga didn't have any way to do long-ranged attacks and couldn't fight, he called Haya instead.

He transferred over the investigation report he got from Leon, and with this his work was over.

〈"It's the same as in other structures, 'Angel' gives away a wide variety of programs that could destroy the game's balance. Calling himself like that on purpose. ...just what is his aim?"〉

"Isn't he just flaunting his abilities?"

Taiga answered not bothered, but Haya wasn't that positive, she seemed anxious.

Certainly, she thought of that possibility. But considering there were many structures that were hit, including large-scale structures managed by Kiritou, it would be better to take care of 'Angel' who was poking holes in the system Kiritou made. If that's happening, the fact that Kiritou will begin moving sooner or later could be easily predicted.

〈"...it seems like he's incredibly confident in his skill."〉

The fact that 'Angel' might really be targeting Kiritou——stimulated the mind of Haya who was suffering from lack of sleep.

〈"——Taiga, additional orders. If you were to get in contact with 'Angel', recover the program made by him."〉

"Haa?! Wait a second, I don't have time for——"

As expected, at this rate he would become her handyman. Just as Taiga was going to refuse, he stumbled seeing the expression on Haya's face that was displayed in the window.

"...fufufufufufu. To come up with such a troublesome task when I'm this busy, and to provoke me like that on top of it... even though I'm already cutting my sleep time to do a mountain of work... I wonder what I'm gonna do to him when I catch him... ufufufufufufufufufufu♪."

Scary—?!

Haya flashed a dark, spine-chilling smile causing Taiga to instinctively back away.

〈"You will do it right?"〉

"...yes."

In front of the smile that seemed to say he would be socially obliterated if he refused, Taiga nodded repeatedly.

Contact me when you find a clue——Haya said that and cut off the connection. Taiga looked up at the sky and murmured words of excuse.

"No—, it was impossible to refuse just now."

He continued to curse himself as he restored his line of sight and saw Shio's appearance as she shot flaming arrows in the air.

"Bullets!"

Together with her voice the arrow divided into dozens of small flaming arrows. The flaming arrows tracked the eagle-type monsters flying in the sky and shot them down one after another by burning their bodies. However, some monsters escaped from the tracking arrow and dived in a straight line at Shio.

If it was Shio from a while ago, that attack would have made her push the panic button.

But as expected, after going through the same thing for five times already, she got used to it. She created an arrow of ice by imagining it and unleashed it.

The arrow rotated in the air and rose to the sky while cutting the wind and pierced through the enemy.

"Woah, you're mastering another one. 《Cryoflare》 was it?"

"Yup. It's all thanks to Onii-san who taught me the basics of the bow."

After using the program in the form of a crystal that was the award for winning the match, Shio's bow turned into a distinctive two-coloured bow that could shoot arrows of fire and ice.

The flame arrows had a tracking ability and the ice arrows could penetrate the targets, it was also possible to use both abilities simultaneously. It was an excellent attack-configured program that had three attack types——the 《Cryoflare》 .

"At this rate it doesn't seem like my turn will come."

"So you say. Even though I've been nearly killed before."

Shio set up another arrow and continued to exterminate enemies.

...I wonder. what are the other two doing now?

Taiga looked as fire and ice intertwined, and his thoughts were directed towards the two girls elsewhere.

Part 3

Qualification holders in 《Aries》——in other words, those of A-rank or higher, to become one it's exceedingly difficult. Among tens of thousands users there's only around a hundred people who hold qualification, because they are only a few percent of the total player base, they are incredibly rare.

Every user starts from rank E, they usually reach C rank after around three months. But even though it proceeds smoothly until then, the road to B rank takes around a year if a user plays every day.

Reaching there is difficult enough, but it only gets harder from then onwards. A lot of players give up on obtaining the next rank.

There's only one condition, to have the ability.

After becoming an A-rank they are allowed to subdue powerful viruses, as such they need to be accordingly strong. In the case of a defeat, the management would charge them a fee for regenerating their virtual bodies, however, that way the original purpose of eliminating viruses would not be achieved.

Therefore there's a certain level of ability required, it was a level completely different from the one normal users could achieve. At the very least, they needed a high level attack-configured program.

And the second was, to complete all area's of Aries.

Unlike the small fries that are controlled by the management, the targets specified for suppression appear randomly and it's impossible to predict it. Sometimes they appear in high difficulty areas, and sometimes they appear near the initial point. Therefore, it's needed to gain access to all areas——in other words, to clear the entire game.

While that condition sounds like something easy to do, that's where the majority of users are stuck at.

The reason is the boss in the final area of 《Aries》——the so-called final boss.

This last boss has strength equal to that of a virus specified as a target for subjugation, and on top of it, there was a need to defeat it solo.

As a result, ever since the 《Aries》 started six years ago, there were only around hundred people who reached A-rank. Moreover, there were only ten people who reached S-rank.

"There there! Take that!!"

"...and what is one of those top ten doing."

Staring at this young heroine who vigorously knocked away monsters with a great momentum, Fuyuki started to forget she was in the middle of combat as well.

Although instant death-class monsters appeared in front of them from a trap, their teeth didn't reach her and the blades pulverized them one after another.

Since Brother was the one in the front recently I forgot, but Rucchan's strength is cheat-class...

In order to get accustomed to fighting in Aries, Rui only provided support from a distance. However, her original battle style was to engage in medium-range combat. She could probably match Taiga when fighting one-on-one.

"Hoo, finally we cleaned it up."

The great heroine wiped three parties with ease, and then Rui waved towards her lightly. Then the weapons dispersed around turned into light. Although Fuyuki thought there might be a need of lending a hand, but it seemed like it wasn't necessary.

"It's the second time I come here, but the traps here are as nasty as usual—. The people who come here for the first time usually die right away."

"When someone who breaks through that unscathed and shamelessly says that, it's not convincing."

The place two of them were at, was area called 《Ancient Ruins》 located far south of the central city. Rui who was an S rank has cleared it long ago, but it was Fuyuki's first time there. When they were at a loss where to go with just the two of them in 《Aries》, this was the place Rui chose.

They proceeded while taking down the monsters that appeared along the way.

Rui acted as a vanguard and took all enemies upon herself, while Fuyuki attacked them from a distance. This was the formation they used continuously for four years, it made Fuyuki feel incredible nostalgia.

...it hasn't been even two weeks and yet it feels like it's been a long time.

That was all, it was more important for her to spend her time with her Brother.

——Fuyuki just wants to be spoiled.

Suddenly, she remembered those words.

That might have been true. But, what's wrong with acting spoiled?

Her only brother in this world, her beloved that she wanted to meet, but couldn't for eight years. If she's not allowed to act spoiled towards someone like that, then where should she seek comfort when facing this suffering, this pain.

When Fuyuki was younger and did not have anyone to rely on, she couldn't withstand the pain. She had no choice but to close the wound, she pretended to have forgotten, she had to live pretending as if nothing happened.

And she deserted her friend who was crushed by despair, she ran away alone.

Scary, is it. Even I think it's incredibly selfish of me to say that...

Even though she was the one who cast her into the depths of despair, but she was still afraid of facing her. Fuyuki knows very well just how selfish that was.

Even so, she wasn't able to gather the resolve to meet her.

"...aah."

Because she was thinking about unnecessary things, she was hit by an attack that normally would never reach her. Probably because it was a high level monster, her HP has decreased by nearly 20%.

"You're not focusing, Fuyuki. At this rate you'll be taken down."

After cleaning all the remaining monsters Rui warned her.

It was one of the highest difficulty areas in Aries. Although Fuyuki boasted of being as strong as an A-rank, her durability was still that of a B rank. It wasn't a place she can let herself drop her guard at. She herself knew that very well, but——.

"...that's impossible."

"Nn?"

"...after being told that there's no way I can focus."

The words stabbed into her mind and continued to circle around in her head without stopping.

She felt as if she strayed into a maze and had no way out. Ever since she reunited with Shio she felt as if her heart was wrapped in mud.

She didn't want to be alone. She wanted to be spoiled by someone. She wanted to seek warmth, but was denied of it.

——If I am to feel like this... I wish I never met Hime-chan!——

The memory didn't fade away, and continued to torment her.

A lonely girl suffering after losing her entire family couldn't withstand it.

"What should little sister do? What should she do to free herself from the past? Please, tell me..."

Standing there, wasn't the girl who was a programming genius.

Grief after losing her parents, the loneliness she felt, the harsh days in Karasuba, the girl continued to deceive herself focusing on her love for her brother. 'For the sake of Brother' she continued to protect herself while indulging in those words, 'For the sake of Brother' she continued to say, relying on him, a small and weak girl.

...at a time like this, if Taiga were here he would gently comfort her.

As Fuyuki continued to fall apart in front of her, Rui could not help her in any way. That's because she knew that if she did it, everything that has been done up until then would have become meaningless.

"——Sorry, Fuyuki. I can't tell you that."

That's why she told her the cruel truth.

"...why, is that...?"

Rui sat down next to Fuyuki and looked into her clear, sky blue eyes. She started speaking slowly.

"Once upon a time, in certain place there was a single girl."

"...what are you saying all of a sudden."

"It's something like a folk tale. Just listen till the end. ...that girl was good at both sports and academics, she was an outstanding child."

"That's a horrible beginning."

"Fufu, so it is. —The chosen girl was very bright and always surrounded by a lot of people. She was always the centre of the class, even her parents thought she led a fulfilling life. But the heart of the girl in question was dry."

"...why?"

"The girl was too outstanding. Whether sports or musical instruments, after doing something for a short while she reached the level where only few could barely keep up... she tried many many things, but she found all of it incredibly boring."

That's why no matter what she tried, she couldn't find someone she could become friends with.

While there were people who could be called her friends, there was no one she had a relationship good enough with to call them 'best friend'.

"She hated such a boring life. Four years ago the girl decided to try playing on a certain structure. She thought that she might find someone the same age as her, and might be able to do something seriously for once. And then, as she indifferently took down monsters in the beginner area, she met a girl with beautiful eyes."

That meeting was a complete coincidence.

However—the girl who was tired of ordinary life, and the girl with an unknown talent who was brought up in an unusual environment met. It might have been inevitable.

"What happened from then onwards, there's no need for me to say it right?"

"Yeah... of course not."

Fuyuki remembered it as if it was yesterday.

To take a breather from research, she entered 《Aries》 while keeping it secret from Karasuba. There, she met a strangely over-familiar girl. Although Fuyuki was scared of becoming friends with anyone, the girl persistently continued to talk to her making her finally decide to go with her on a journey together—that was how she met Saionji Rui.

"Eh—, now that I think about it, it was really too much. I was one step away from being mistaken as a stalker."

"...I'm grateful to Rucchan."

If Rui wasn't so forceful, she would continue to be alone—that's what Fuyuki thought. It was the first time she heard about Rui's past, but no matter the reason, she was grateful to her for breaking her out of her shell.

"Thanks. Umm, I want to say that... no matter what shape it takes, Fuyuki should seriously face Shio-chan head on. Just like Rui-san."

"...but."

"You might face these bitter feelings again. Nevertheless, nothing will change unless you make that step. If Fuyuki wants to live while being troubled by those feelings, Rui-san won't say anything else. But if you want to start over with Shio-chan, even if you think of it just a little bit, Rui-san will help you. Shall we do our best together?"

——This much help should be fine, right? Taiga.

She said that in her mind to the boy with sky blue eyes and reached out to Fuyuki again. Fuyuki looked up and stared at Rui's hand.

And thought about it.

She met Rui, and was saved from the darkness. She took this hand, and was able to break out from her lonely life. In that case——after she ran away, was there anyone who would save Shio?

...are you going to leave it to someone else again?

These were the words she aimed at herself.

Her brother declared that he will definitely stay by her side. Even though the truth was that he was really weak, even though he wanted support, he pretended to be strong.

If that was the case, she will change, here and now.

To become someone strong enough to support another person, just like she was saved by Rui before, she will change into someone strong and capable of saving another. The lie will become truth.

"Little sister is a weak person."

"That may be so."

"Just getting spoiled by both Brother and Rucchan, she never confronted anyone seriously. If it's painful, she might run away again. At that time——will you scold little sister?"

"Yup, of course."

Taking the outstretched hand, Fuyuki rose up. Her sky-blue azure pupils were completely different from before, a shine of resolute will dwelled within them.

"...I keep troubling and being taken care of by Rucchan."

"Don't mind it, don't mind it. We're friends after all."

Rui laughed as she said that, Fuyuki said 'thank you' again, conveying her heartfelt gratitude.

"Then, what do we do now? Go to where Shio-chan is immediately?"

"No... before that, there's something I need to tell to both Brother and Rucchan. Let's change the location to somewhere we can talk in silence."

"Oh, then won't that place be good?"

"That place?"

"Yup. We have preferential rights, it's a good opportunity to visit it isn't it?"

Rui held out a window while saying so, on it were written coordinates of 《Oonira》 structure.

Part 4

"...nn? An e-mail?"

It was just when they left the canyon area and entered the plain. Suddenly, a mail screen appeared in front of Taiga. The sender of the e-mail was——Tenryo Fuyuki.

He checked it the very moment Shio wasn't looking his way, looking through the contents of the e-mail.

These coordinates were not that of 《Aries》, they showed a different structure. Taiga was completely out of touch with the Elysion(Cyber World), but he was able to trigger a transition using the mail.

...that Rui, it seems like it went well.

There was nothing that said what happened in the mail. However, Taiga believed that his little sister definitely will move forward.

"Onii-san, did something happen?"

"Sorry Shio. Something came up. Can I log out for a while?"

"Oh, is that so. Then maybe I'll take a break as well..."

"Is that so. It should be fine to stop for today. Thanks."

"Thank you ver——"

As Shio waved modestly to him, Taiga touched the coordinates provided in the e-mail and starting the transition process. His visibility was quickly dyed white, Taiga closed his eyes preparing for the incoming shock of spatial transition.

After the feeling of his entire body being twisted vanished, he was in a completely different world.

"...this place doesn't feel like Elysion(Cyber World) at all."

It was lacking the feel virtual reality had, it was a place that looked like a hotel lobby. There was a receptionist in the front and dozen of doors lined up in the back.

"Oh, he's here. Taigaa—, over here—!"

There were Fuyuki and Rui standing in the corner, they were wearing their uniforms. They waved vigorously to him making them very noticeable. He checked himself a bit worried, but it seemed like Taiga's clothes also changed to a school uniform.

"Hee— it feels like it's been a while since we've been together the three of us, doesn't it?"

"Though it hasn't been even half a day."

"Recently we've been constantly together— . Separating for a while gives a feeling of freshness doesn't it?"

There were roughly twenty people inside of the lobby. Most of them were dressed in plain clothes, in fact, the three in school uniforms stood out.

"So what were you doing on your side?"

"Shopping mainly, Rucchan chose some clothes for little sister."

"Yup, I've chosen a lot of cute ones. You'll enjoy it once we're back. How about Taiga? You were with Shio-chan all this time right?"

"...well, yeah."

He glanced at Fuyuki to see how she reacts, but she wasn't upset at all and just stared back at him. Her eyes conveyed 'It's fine now', causing Taiga to be secretly relieved.

"Brother. I don't think that would happen, but you didn't force the entire story out of her right? "

"From Shio? There's no way I'd do that. I taught her how to use a bow, gathered information about some weird guy and for some reason I ended up fighting in Arena. I was really busy you know?"

"...it was the same with the Grim Reaper incident, Brother really does have a terribly bad luck."

"...I think so as well."

Both the matter of Haya's orders and the case of Tokuma, he felt like a lot happened to him.

"Hey, the two of you. Don't just stand here chatting, we should go in."

"Hm, that's right."

"By the way, what kind of structure is this? Our clothes are one thing, but it doesn't feel like Elysion(Cyber World) at all..."

"This is 《Oonira》, it's a small structure that's been very popular lately."

"Oh. I feel like I've heard that name before...?"

"Did you forget? It's the one Taiga won preferential rights for in a game during Shinkansai, it's that."

"...ahhh! I completely forgot."

He manipulated his terminal and pulled out the preferential rights data, of which its existence he forgot. It allowed them to play in the super popular 《Oonira》 structure without having to make a reservation six months ahead, there was a time limit of one hour.

"It uses a private room system, which makes it perfect for us to talk calmly, let's use it."

Fuyuki took the data from Taiga's hand and passed it to a woman at reception, they heard a brief description saying how to use it (but Taiga didn't pay attention to it), and they received a passkey from her. The trio walked down the hall looking for the room the number on the passkey indicated.

"This really does look like a hotel..."

"It seems like it's built like that on purpose. The rooms in here usually are rented for days, I've heard that some people even sleep in here."

"What happens if you sleep in cyber world?"

"The brain doesn't rest completely, but it seems to have some effect?"

"——And here we are."

The colour of the door changed from red to blue after Fuyuki used the passkey, the remaining time and amount of people using it was displayed on the nameplate. But that was all, there was no sign of the door opening.

"Let's not waste time and enter already."

Fuyuki said so and took a step forward——slipping through the door like a ghost. Rui entered it as well, surprised, Taiga followed them.

"What's this? There's nothing in this white space?"

On the other side of door, there was completely nothing. Furniture aside, there wasn't even any light sources, only white walls surrounding them from four directions.

"As expected, this is really bare. Let's do a makeover."

Fuyuki closed her eyes. The walls and floors changed shape, turning into ones made of wood. A comfortable-looking sofa appeared from nowhere.

"...ha?"

"Since we're already here, why don't we add some more? How about this?"

While Taiga was surprised by the fact that the room suddenly changed, the room itself increased in size and things like tables and beds kept appearing.

"...what's up with this room?"

"To put it simply, it's a room that changes its shape according to one's imagination. It changes according to what the people inside envision. How about Brother also tries it?"

While still doubtful, he solidified an image in his head. He imagined that he held an object in his hand——the mock sword he always used during his morning training.

"Oh...!"

It appeared just as he imagined it, Taiga was slightly impressed.

"Fufufu... it doesn't just produce objects, even something like this can be done!"

Then, Taiga's body suddenly started floating in the air.

He looked around surprised, both Fuyuki and Rui as well as the previously made furniture were all floating.

"A space without gravity. That's what you thought of instantly... as expected of Rucchan."

"This is certainly amazing... however, it's really annoying too."

Because there was a lot of furniture inside, the room turned into something miserable.

The objects in the air continued to float and move around, it looked as if a typhoon entered the room and devastated it. It was difficult to move in there.

Rui snapped her fingers and the gravity returned to normal. The design of the room also changed at the same time, the interior changed into one that had a calm atmosphere and felt like a recreation room.

"Interesting isn't it?"

"Indeed. It can be used really, in many ways."

The mock sword also disappeared before he noticed. It seemed like it was possible to interfere with things other people created.

"So, we're gonna talk about...?"

"That's..."

Suddenly hesitating to speak up, Fuyuki forced herself to form the words.

Neither Taiga nor Rui said anything, they waited patiently for her to let it out. Fuyuki repeatedly took a deep breath to calm herself, and started to talk slowly.

"——Little sister's and Karasuba Shio's... no, Shii-chan's past."

Their first meeting and their parting.

"Shii-chan, eh. Is that how you called her long time ago?"

"Yeah, eight years ago little sister was taken in by one of the four largest programming companies 'Karasuba'. Theoretically, I was an adopted child."

"...theoretically?"

As Fuyuki clenched her teeth strongly, Taiga could see that she was uncomfortable. In truth, it was different——he heard as if she said that.

"Just like Kiritou is developing human resources in their school, Karasuba also brings up researchers in their own way. Internal educational institution

『Bird Cage』. The little sister who was an adoptive child was taken there, there were many children without relatives in there."

She was given the last name of Karasuba on the family register. However, she didn't have a single memory of meeting with people who were her adoptive parents. A family only on paper, total strangers—that was the relationship she had with Karasuba.

"Speaking of which, you said that before. That you graduated after a year thanks to treatment that allowed you to skip grades."

"Yes. Although, that place can't be called a school. It could be called a factory producing researchers."

"...that's quite an unpleasant expression."

"All the teachers were AI, I was confined in a private room and unable to leave it until I finished the daily quota. It wasn't very school-like."

People who reached a certain level were able to graduate. It was possible for Fuyuki who was incredibly outstanding to graduate within a year, however, normally to reach a level required to become Karasuba's researcher, it takes more than a decade.

"For Karasuba, little sister was just a tool. A tiny gear made for moving the Karasuba's huge system... and it didn't change even after she graduated from the 『Bird Cage』. Every day she continued to create programs alone, in a small laboratory. After just six months of that, little sister couldn't stand it and started to work on escaping. That's when she met a single girl."

"And that was Shio-chan?"

"Yes. ...from now onwards, it should be easier if you saw it yourselves."

Fuyuki who stood in the centre of the room closed her eyes quietly. The outline of the room started to distort, the data they gathered from their five senses like sound and colours also went bad.

"《Oonira》's usage isn't limited to redecorating the room. Even memories can be visualized as if they were a video."

Immediately after that, the space rapidly formed a shape. In front of the three appeared a pure white room that had size of about ten tatami mats.

There were a few things that could be called furniture inside, kitchenette, a medium-sized Arclight and a minimum of daily necessities.

In there, was a figure of young Fuyuki. She was wearing a pompous cloak disproportionate to her small body, she was incredibly adorable.

"Cuuute〜!!"

"It's little sister, so that's a given. ...now then I will start it, please stay quiet."

The video started to move. Apparently young Fuyuki just came back from theElySION(Cyber World), she raised her body and stretched.

"Funyaa... tired..."

The girl rubbed her eyes, then slowly removed the headgear and opened the refrigerator. She drank a jelly-like contents all at once.

Although there were no windows, but it seemed like it was morning. On the window that appeared beside Fuyuki was a clock which displayed the time, it was eight o'clock.

Judging by how tired she was, it seemed like she had been working the entire night.

"...Onii... I want to meet you..."

She was looking at a picture. It was the last photo of the siblings taken when they were parting eight years ago. Young Fuyuki gently traced Taiga's face and tears appeared in her eyes.

She was at her limit.

While originally she was scared of strangers, Fuyuki was already more shy than anyone. She lost her parents, separated from her brother, she spent over a year in solitude and her heart was starving for a connection.

But there wasn't even a single opportunity. At that day, Fuyuki decided to run away.

Not thinking much, she unlocked the doors by hacking it and young Fuyuki jumped out of the laboratory.

"Haa... haa..."

She continued to run while being out of breath.

Although she was originally bad with exercising, she didn't go out for more than a year and a half, her physical strength has dropped significantly. Fuyuki didn't know the structure of the research building, and ran away towards the mountains to get away, her stamina was wasted in vain.

"Auu... it's not here either..."

Young Fuyuki was very smart and knew very well that she'd be brought back if she's found.

That's why she continued to change direction whenever she saw an adult—that happened so many times she was soon completely exhausted.

And, she heard adults talking in front of her, Fuyuki quickly entered the closest room——

"...who are you?"

She met a girl with silver hair.

The girl was surprised by the sudden intrusion. She was probably working on something, a huge amount of windows was expanded. On the other hand, it was the first time for Fuyuki to meet a girl her age, and couldn't hide her surprise at the room's appearance.

Bright purple colour occupied her field of view. Rainy season flowers known as hydrangea decorated the room.

It was obvious that they were artificial. But inside of the room there was a damp smell floating around, as if it were raining. Because of this aroma, young Fuyuki was reminded of the time she spent with her family.



"...why are you crying?"

"Eh...?"

Only after being told that, Fuyuki noticed she was crying. As she hurriedly wiped her tears, feelings of nostalgia filled her thoughts immediately.

"Uu...Uuuu...UAAaaa..."

"Eh, hey?! Eh?!"

The girl panicked as Fuyuki suddenly started crying. Not knowing what to do, but still unable to leave the sobbing girl alone——

"Umm... there, there."

She put her hand on Fuyuki's head and gently stroked it.

That hand was very gentle, causing Fuyuki to cry again.

And that was Fuyuki's and Shio's——meeting of two lonely girls.

"I am Karasuba Shio. What's your name?"

"...Tenr..yo... no, Karasuba Fuyuki."

"Karasuba? ...can it be, you're from the 『Bird Cage』 ?"

"Yes. And you're not?"

"Yup. I'm from the head family."

Ten minutes after their sudden encounter, Fuyuki was sitting on the coach beside Shio. It's been a while since she talked to someone her age, so she was a bit nervous.

"...so you're a real ojou-sama?"

"That's right. Although since I'm the second daughter, and I have an older brother I'm not the successor to Karasuba."

"Ha〜...you're amazing."

Unconsciously, Fuyuki sighed in admiration.

If she was from one of the four major cyber-related corporates
『Karasuba』 , that meant she was a top class ojou-sama.

However the person in question looked troubled and shook her head.

"It's not that great. Rather than that, I think you're more amazing for being given your own laboratory at that age. Isn't that more outstanding?"

"...after being locked in a place like this, I'm happy that I did my best."

Those were the feelings from the bottom of her heart.

I want to see Brother. If I excel at studies and have achievements I'll be able to act freely—that's what she thought in her young mind, and Fuyuki graduated from 『Bird Cage』 after a year of desperate effort, she devoted herself to studying to the very limit, even sacrificing sleep.

And yet, her situation didn't change at all. Rather than that, she was entrusted with copious amount of work, and her free time rapidly vanished. Contrary to her expectations, the reality cornered her.

"You're happy that you did your best, is it... hey, how do you write 'Fuyuki'?"

"Umm, 'fuyu' as in winter and 'hime' as in princess, read as Fuyuki."

"Fuyuki... then I'll call you Hime-chan."

"Mu... then I'll call you Shii-chan."

"Shii-chan... it's the first time I've been called that. Yup, I like it."

Contrary to her young appearance, Fuyuki had a adult-like name she was concerned with.

That's why when she was called with a childlike name 'Hime-chan' she retaliated... but she also unexpectedly liked it.

"Hey, Hime-chan. Why did you become a researcher?"

"...that's how it turned out. Also, I have a goal. And for that goal I need to become even better."

"Even better... in that case, I think you need to try even harder you know?"

"Even... harder?"

"I don't know what Hime-chan's goal is, but normally what researchers can do is limited. You need to become a senior researcher at the very least."

"Is that so. So unless I reach even higher, it's no good."

Fuyuki calmed down, and started to think realistically again.

Even if she got out of the researcher's building, what would she do afterwards. If they found out she tried to run away, they would become vigilant from that moment onward——she couldn't let that happen.

Just when she thought of that. Shio clapped both of her hands and said "I thought of something good".

"That's right. Hime-chan, why won't you help me study?"

"Study?"

"Yup. It's fine if it's only when you have free time. Hime-chan is around my age right? I think it's better to study together with other people of the same age."

Fuyuki was hesitant, but there was only one answer.

"..if that's what you want, then I don't mind doing it as my thanks for earlier."

"I see, thank you! Then let's do our best starting from tomorrow."

And like that Fuyuki continued to stay at Karasuba, the two of them continued to study together in Shio's study room.

Fuyuki who was almost crushed by loneliness made a friend who filled the gap in her heart even if just by a bit. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say Shio was the reason she could stand the harsh days in laboratory.

She felt fun spending time with Shio. However, Fuyuki noticed that occasionally Shio smiled in distress.

When she asked her why did she decorate the room with artificial hydrangea, Shio replied.

"That's because hydrangea tries its best to shine even in rain, right? Even when it's hard, it desperately tries and shines no matter what."

When she heard that for the first time she thought 'she looks at it from a strange perspective'.

But three months after their first study session, on a certain day. Fuyuki overheard Shio's conversation with her father by coincidence, and found the reason.

Ever since then, the gears slowly started to go crazy.

Why are you so incompetent——that's what her father said, scolding her.

Your older brother, your older sister... he compared her to her siblings. He tore her report card that showed her overall quite outstanding marks to shreds, and deleted the immature program she made.

After her father left, Shio desperately endured, trying not to cry as her shoulders trembled.

Hidden Fuyuki heard her worried voice "I need to do my best", that's all she said before heading towards the desk. Ever since then, she saw that scene many times.

The reprimands from her father intensified. Shio tried her best, studying by the desk to live up to her father's expectations. Doing that every day, she slowly turned haggard.

And as Shio continued to look worse and worse. Wanting to cheer her up somehow, Fuyuki talked about the results of her own research. As she showed her the program she made, Shio's expression turned dark.

Fuyuki desperately thought how to cheer her up——and what she came up with, was making an entertainment program that would help her get well.

Shii-chan loves the look of hydrangea, let's add a comforting fragrance into it as well.

For Fuyuki who only made practical programs up until then, it was a challenge for her to make one for the first time.

That was because in 『Bird Cage』 she was only taught techniques maximizing efficiency in programs. There was no place for entertainment elements in the basic knowledge she was taught. She had to learn from scratch.

I've been making a program for Shii-chan, because she was too embarrassed to say that, she lied saying that's the reason she can't attend study sessions, and used that time to develop the entertainment program.

She just wanted her to cheer up.

However, Fuyuki didn't notice. Who really cornered Shio, was Fuyuki herself.

If you get better even better you'll be free. She believed the words Shio said, and Fuyuki's talent fully bloomed.

Even if they begin at different starting lines, if you do your best you'll be rewarded some day. My strict father will definitely recognize me——Shio kept working hard while believing in that. However, Fuyuki's presence showed her the cruel reality 'there's no point in struggling if you don't have a talent'.

Negative feelings continued to undermine Shio's heart little by little, and ironically, it was the program Fuyuki made for her that broke her heart.

"Shii-chan, Shii-chan! Please look. I'm finally done!"

That day, with a program she just completed, Fuyuki visited Shio's study room.

The girl she didn't see for four days was waiting in the room from which lights have disappeared. There was a deep despair engraved in her pupils, but there was no way the excited Fuyuki could notice it.

"...done?"

"Yes!! Umm, please take this. It's a present for Shii-chan!"

Fuyuki projected a pale purple crystal and held it out towards Shio.

Shio timidly took it and asked for information about the content while looking at it.

"Since Shii-chan wasn't looking too good recently. This not only has a visual effect and sense of smell, but also a calming auditory effect. It was my first time making an entertainment program, but somehow I managed to make it!"

"First time... this...?"

It was an advanced program Shio couldn't make even if she stood on her head. In just a few days time, moreover it was her first try——intense jealousy of her talent raged within Shio.

And all the emotions that accumulated within her until then exploded.

"Why did you make such a thing... do you want to show off your talent that much?!"

Shio cried out and forcefully pushed Fuyuki's hand away. Because of that hit, the memory card inserted in Fuyuki's terminal flew away, hit the wall and broke.

"Hime-chan is always like that! Have you ever thought of how I feel when I see a program Hime-chan made?! How it feels to realize my own incompetence?!"

With these words, Fuyuki finally realized she has cornered Shio.

"T-thats not what I... I just wanted for Shii-chan to be more cheerful——"

"Who asked you to do that?! ...I was always jealous Hime-chan, what I wanted the most, I couldn't help but be jealous of Hime-chan's talent which was recognized by everyone!! Even I, even I want to be praised! Even if just once, I want to be told that I did well!!"

No matter how hard she tried, no one acknowledged it.

Even when her results improved, she was only scolded 'why did you improve only this much'.

In that case——there was no meaning in working hard.

"Aa...uu... Shi... Shii-cha...n..."

In front of that outburst of emotions, Fuyuki could only be intimidated.

I need to say something, at this rate she'll break——even though she knew that, it was the first time such negative emotions were directed towards her, and she couldn't say anything.

"If I am to feel like this... I wish I never met Hime-chan!"

"——!!"

Hearing the words that denied all this time they spend together every day up until then, Fuyuki ran away while blocking her ears with her hands.

She continued to run like crazy and before she noticed, she collapsed on her bed and cried.

"Help me... someone help me... Onii..."

No one responded to her heartbreaking cries. She lost her only friend.

There was no one who could be together with her no longer.

"——That's all, the entire past little sister and Shii-chan share."

The memory playback was finished, and the figure of a young girl collapsing in tears in solitude slowly faded away in front of the three. I must have been painful for her to recall the past as Fuyuki sat down on the coach and deeply exhaled.

"...what happened to Fuyuki after this?"

"Nothing. I was too immersed in the study to leave the room, I did everything to forget it. Ever since then, I haven't met Shii-chan even once."

Shio never visited Fuyuki's laboratory, in the first place a young lady of Karasuba family had no contact with researchers from 『Bird Cage』. There was no opportunity for them to meet in person.

"I see. You said before 『I made an entertainment program before, only once』 so it was the gift for Shio-chan."

"Yeah. I remember it's code even now. I probably won't ever forget it."

"...do you regret it? The fact that you didn't notice how Shio felt?"

"...I wonder? Whether it's guilt, or maybe it's regret... I no longer know it myself."

Saying so, Fuyuki made a tearful smile. I want to heal it somehow——thought Taiga, with a fragile smile.

"Oh, that's right. Rui-san will go outside for some fresh air."

With that, Rui suddenly stood up. Taiga said "This is Elysion(Cyber World) going outside for fresh air..." and tilted his head. Rui moved her lips to his ears and——

"I'll come back in ten minutes. I leave Fuyuki to you～"

Leaving these words behind, she left the room.

"...Rucchan really is a busybody."

It seemed like Fuyuki knew what her underlying motive was. As Taiga sat down beside her, she put down her head on his shoulder as usual. Because of a flowery aroma coming from her black hair, he felt a bit dreamy.

"...what should little sister do."

Her feelings spilled out. There was no need to answer——that's what he felt. He responded while gently stroking Fuyuki's head.

"It's not something I should be telling you. It's up to what Fuyuki wants to do, that is all. ...and that answer, you already have it, don't you?"

Immersed in the pleasant feeling of being gently patted on the head, Fuyuki closed her eyes.

What she thought of, were the days she spent with Shio. The days they had fun together, and the tears she had in her eyes when she last saw her.

What she wants to do——she already knew what, for eight years now.

Even so, she was scared to meet her, and continued to run away.

She acknowledged her weakness. And wanted to move forward one step at a time. Let's move forward. And for the sake of doing that——

"I want to apologize to Shi-chan. And I want to get along with her once again."

First of all, that's where she'll start.

"The fact that little sister was always relying on Brother... I finally realized that."

"Relying on someone is not a bad thing."

"That's true... but, relying on someone and becoming dependent is not. Little sister wants to live with Brother as equals. That's why, give me courage."

"...courage?"

Fuyuki placed her hands on Taiga's and intertwined her fingers with his. She stared straight at him.

"Shii-chan comforted little sister when she was crying, it's time for little sister to pay Shii-chan back. That's why——once again, give me courage to stand in front of Shii-chan."

Fuyuki said that, closed her eyes and raised her chin.

Even the super dense Taiga realized what she expected of him. Or rather, there was only one thing that could be done with that posture of hers. Taiga's vision shook as he hesitated——

"...this has to suffice."

He stopped hesitating, scooped up her hair with one hand and kissed her bare forehead.

Fuyuki opened her eyes a bit annoyed, she had a dissatisfied expression on her face.



"...little sister was expecting something more on the lips?"

"Don't say nonsense. As if I could do something like that so simply."

His heart was beating nervously with just kissing her forehead. Her lips were too high of a hurdle—and if it was with Fuyuki, then all the more.

"Is this fine?"

"Yeah. ...well, little sister wonders if it's really all right for her first kiss to be on a place like that, but will settle for on the forehead for now. But, please don't forget this."

She slowly traced Taiga's lips with her white fingers. Stuck out her tongue, laughed and sweetly bit his neck.

"Little sister will be the one to take them... so you can't let other women take them, okay?"

—Now. Let's go and retrieve what I left behind in the past.

Part 5

"...fuu."

After shooting about twenty arrows into a large tree that was fifty metres away, Shio lowered her bow.

Shio parted with Taiga, and wanted to log out at first. But she thought of practicing instead, and remained in 《Aries》.

"It's really easy to aim and hit the target with this bow after all."

《Cryoflare》 was a bow strong enough to allow her to subjugate viruses, but its habits were very strong. Although it would be misleading to say it picked its master, but it seemed to match Shio well.

I'll practice a little longer, and surprise Onii-san tomorrow.

It was fun to see herself grow after committing to it and putting in effort—it was a feeling she long forgot.

Young children that don't know reality could be forgiven for it. But as a person from Karasuba's main family, results mattered more than the process.

But it was different in 《Aries》. Here she wasn't 'Karasuba Shio' but just another girl, she could do whatever she wanted, no one would tell her what to do. She would do it by her own will.

"Alright, let's try another twenty times."

Shio set up the bow to start shooting again.

She concentrated and didn't notice the gaze that was staring at her back.

About fifty metres behind Shio, on a small cliff there was a virtual body that put on a white robe completely covering the entire body——'Angel', and Tokuma whose pupils were completely unfocused.

"Hmm, it seems like he's not there. It seems like I can carry it out more smoothly than expected. Looks like I am lucky after all."

Angel looked down on Shio's figure as she kept shooting arrows and snapped its fingers. Suddenly, Tokuma who was expressionless like a doll opened his eyes widely all at once.

"Now, Tokuma... there's the girl who was together with the boy you lost to."

"...wom...an...."

"You fought him and lost, he's the ringleader behind all this. You hate him right? If she's hurt, I wonder what face would that boy make?"

His thinking was cloudy as mud, that whisper turned into an absolute 'order' he had to obey. It no longer mattered who's the opponent, there was only the grudge in his mind.

"...pull...tear..."

"That's right. You have the program made by me, 《Replicon》 that raises your specs beyond comparison. And you don't have the reason to run away any more——you can rampage as you please."

"Aa....gaa...ruRAAAaaa(howl)AAAAHHHH(howl)!!!!"

Tokuma howled unlike any normal human ever could, and jumped off the cliff. There were fifty metres of distance to the target in a straight line——a distance he should never be able to close with a leap, and jumped with abnormal leg power.

"Eh——?"

gagon, hearing a strange sound behind her, Shio immediately looks behind.

The man who was in her line of sight, was the same A-ranked player she saw a few hours earlier in the arena. Tokuma pulled out the whip sword from his waist and swung it down with brute force!

"HYARAAAAAAaaaaaaa(howl)!!"

"KyaAA?!"

It was so sudden Shio couldn't move properly. The jet black whip sword slammed to the right beside her and tore through the earth engraving an over twenty meter long, deep scar. Because of that huge power her body rose up, and then Shio fell to the ground.

crnch... along with the sound of someone stepping on the gravel, a shadow appeared in her field of vision. In front of Shio who looked up tearfully, was the figure of a man brandishing a sword in silence.

"...y-you are... Tokuma-san? Why did you... suddenly——auu!!"

She asked with a trembling voice, the reply to her question was a heartless blow. The whip sword bore through the ground forcefully once again, Shio rolled away blown off by the impact.

N-need to run——

Attacked without reason.

But what occupied her heart wasn't the way Tokuma acted.

Shio was always living while being told off by her family, so she was very sensitive to malice when it was directed toward her. That's why she knew. Hating to this extent was abnormal.

That's why she threw away unnecessary thoughts and only thought about fleeing.

But in this situation she couldn't escape that easily. Although Shio tried to run away with her back turned to Tokuma, but again her escape route was cut off by 《Cihuacóatl》's blow.

I can't... with an opponent who has such a long range weapon, I'll be done in for before I manage to run away...

Shio hid in the back of a tree, immediately after the sword whip continued to randomly hit everything around. The slashes were hitting all around, but they were not even remotely close to hit Shio.

...?

Now that she thought about it, it was strange from the first blow. She saw his skill when he fought with Taiga.

With an opponent who couldn't move a single step, why did he continuously swing it at random?

Maybe he can't aim properly?

With him in such an erratic state, it wasn't impossible. She could disengage if she triggered the move command now. Thinking so, Shio expanded the window——

〈"Error. This command is currently unavailable."〉

"Eh... why?!"

The moment she started the move process, a window appeared displaying an error message. Her only means of escape disappeared, in this abnormal situation Shio's head went blank, confused.

Impossible. To disable a system command, it was absolutely impossible unless someone used their Master Code(Administrative Privileges)——

"——!! Kyaaaaaaaaa!!!"

She dodged the tip of the sword in the nick of time. But the big tree that was acting like a wall was cut in two and disappeared becoming particles of light.

She couldn't escape. The obstacle that acted as a shield was no longer there. No matter how insane Tokuma was, his weapon had a total length of twenty metres. Even if he waved it at random, it would hit her.

There was only one option left, just one. To fight with Tokuma.

...alright, let's try it...

It's a game after all, it's fine to lose——Shio didn't think like that.

She finally found the place she can do her best at, no, found the place she belongs to. There's no way she would give up on it so simply.

Shio stood up determined, she set up the bow aiming the arrow in front of her.

She was too inexperienced to know any tricks, so there was no meaning in them. Even though she couldn't afford to stand still because she would get hit by the whip sword. Shio had no other choice but to hit him with her strongest attack head-on.

Shio exposed her unprotected form, the sword whip slashed horizontally and vertically, but it only hit the ground around Tokuma. During that opening, the arrow was clad in both red and blue, and its power increased thanks to the two conflicting attributes.

"Charging complete... gooooooooo!!"

Together with Shio's yell, the arrow clad in both ice and hell fire was launched.

The arrow flew in straight line towards its target freezing and burning everything on its path at the same time, it grazed the 《Cihuacóatl》 and flew past the blade before penetrating Tokuma's brain.

It exploded with a roar, both ice and flame spread widely.

Fully charged blow, and additional bonus for hitting the head. The bodily ability didn't have much effect on the bow's ability, if succeeded, the damage to enemy should be severe—that is if enemy was normal.

Her visibility was covered with white smoke that looked like steam, Shio took a deep breath and lowered her bow—however, using that opportunity, a black shadow jumped out from the white smoke.

She reflexively shot an arrow at the shadow's head, but its movement didn't stop.

"Aguu!?"

Tokuma's right hand grasped Shio's neck, and slammed her into the ground.

And continued to strangle her like that with enough strength to break her bones.

There was no concept of suffocation in Elysion(Cyber World), but people still suffered if they couldn't breathe, that didn't change in cyber world.

"Haa...!! aaa..."

Shio was being held by the neck and couldn't get up. Tokuma raised 《Cihuacóatl》 which turned back into the shape of a sword and swung it down at her unprotected neck——

"——That's enough, Tokuma."

Together with that voice someone snapped their fingers, the jet black blade stopped. Tokuma's movement stopped as if he was a mechanical doll with its power cut off, the madness and emotions that dominated his eyes disappeared

She wondered since when it was there. A white virtual body 'appeared' beside Tokuma——and looked down at Shio who couldn't move, it's mouth distorted.

"Nice to meet you, I guess? Karasuba Shio."

"...who are you?"

Although it might have seemed that someone came to help her, Shio wasn't that optimistic.

An unidentified virtual body that knew her name——although she was still confused and didn't understand the situation, she somehow squeezed out the words.

"For the time being I call myself 'Angel', but call me however you want. Because there's no meaning in having names after all."

"...Angel? The one that spreads those strange programs——"

"It's a bit different. I'm just giving people what they need. Like Tokuma here——or like you."

"Me...?"

She didn't understand. Why would her name appear there.

"He, Tokuma was defeated, and to take revenge on Tenryo Taiga who took away his position in Aries he took the power. You too have been

deprived of the place you belong to in the past. That's enough of a reason to desire power."

"Why do you know that?!"

After these words, she remembered about the girl who was once her friend. Why would the memory she didn't share with anyone be known by this mysterious virtual body——

"Because I've heard it. The story about you two's past, I was together with those three. Karasuba Fuyuki, no, now she's Tenryo Fuyuki is she. Don't you want to take revenge on her? Didn't you suffer because of her?"

These words stabbed deep into her, Shio looked below for a moment. The Angel didn't miss that.

"It seems like you thought about it before."

"...it's true that I always had a grudge against her. But... when I spoke with Onii-san I noticed. Rather than continue that, it's better to find something more fun to do."

That's right.

If she gave into despair, there was nothing she could obtain. Even if she didn't have a talent it was fine, she should enjoy herself as she improved.

Shio finally arrived at that conclusion,

"——What. So you're a human only worth that much."

Angel discarded it with those words.

"Eh——?"

"I thought you were the same kind of human as I am... it seems like I was wrong. You're a human being much weaker than I am. You don't even have courage to raise your head, a really worthless human."

"Wrong! I just——"

"To look for something fun to do? There's no meaning in these words. You will keep your resentment, it will not disappear. That's just escaping. Nothing can change the past you suffered. Unless you take your revenge, you won't be able to move forward."

pishin, she heard a sound as if something cracked in her. A slight opening was carved in her heart, Angel's words seeped into her heart like poison.

"That's hateful right? She has everything you lack. Not only talent, she even has a brother who cherishes her."

"...Onii...-san..."

A part of her heart was swayed. It felt as if there was no determination, but Angel's words wiped out those feelings.

"You admire him, right? His appearance as he faced the adversity. You're jealous right? Of Fuyuki who has such a wonderful family member. If you win against Tenryo Fuyuki—you might be acknowledged by the person you admire?"

With the last words, a fire in her heart was lit and her emotions ached, they unnaturally expanded. All of her emotions said one thing—defeat Tenryo Fuyuki.

"That's it—the expression I waited for."

Aiming for the moment her emotions were at the peak, Angel pushed the crystal it had on it hand into Shio. A bluish white pulse(electromagnetic wave) ran through her entire body, from Shio's mouth a soundless scream rose.

"Now then, I've input it perfectly. Whether she withstands is up to her... I have no other candidate. Don't break down immediately like he did okay?"

Angel stared at the screaming Shio as if she was an ant, and laughed.

Chapter 5 – Bonds of hydrangea

Part 1

"Nn〜...it's strange after all..."

"Taiga, you've been glaring at the terminal for a while now, what happened?"

The next day after they heard about Fuyuki's and Shio's past, Taiga, wearing his school uniform was visiting 《Paradise》 to have breakfast. Unfortunately, it was raining today; the rain that poured down quietly caused the air to have an indescribable taste.

Like she usually did, Rui made the breakfast while wearing the maid outfit, but she was also worried about Taiga who kept fiddling with his terminal, she stopped her hands and inquired about that.

"Nothing, I tried to contact Shio ever since yesterday, but she didn't answer at all. I was wondering at what time should I dive today."

Although he tried both interactive communication and e-mailing her, there was no response at all. Shio wasn't attending school, and thinking that she slept until this late wasn't believable. It wasn't weird for Taiga to worry, though Rui was worried about something else.

"...just when did you get Shio-chan's contact address?"

"When, you ask. Yesterday. We can't meet in the real world, it would be inconvenient not to know it."

"...mu—"

He was right, he was right but——that wasn't interesting at all.

Rui forgot she was currently in the middle of cooking and stretched her hand towards Taiga's cheek, she pulled it lightly.

"...ut ah oo oing(what are you doing)?"

"It's been only a day since you met right? Rui-san thinks it a bit too fast."

Rui was blatantly unhappy, she repeated the same thing three times, and after pulling a bit harder in the end she let go. Taiga refuted while rubbing his slightly red cheek.

"Even though you say that... I've asked for Rui's contact info on the day we met as well right?"

"That's true, but somehow I'm not convinced..."

"What's up with that..."

Recently, Rui's mood often turned for the worse like that all of a sudden. Although it usually had something to do with Fuyuki, it seemed like it wasn't limited to her.

"I've already told you yesterday, a lot happened. It wasn't long but it was pretty intense, so the distance between us shrunk naturally."

"...I know that but..."

Since Rui quickly became close to him in a similar way, she couldn't deny it.

"...speaking of which, why is Fuyuki taking a day off? Did her physical ability give out?"

Only Taiga and Rui were present in Paradise at the moment, the black-haired petite girl that was usually next to them was absent.

"No, that's not it. She wanted to recreate the program she gave Shio in the past no matter what. 'This time I won't run away, in order to get my friend back' is what she said."

Using all her abilities, I'll make an improved version——after saying so last night, Fuyuki began to work in the dive room.

"Is that so. Is that all right? What if she passes out in the room..."

"When I went to check up on her in the morning, she was sleeping on the floor. I carried her to bed and prepared breakfast. She should be eating it when she wakes up."

"Eh? Taiga, you can cook?"

"Well, I just made simple rice balls with just rice and nothing else inside."

It was a great help that rice cookers were fully automated these days.

Although he wanted to take a day off together with her, Taiga was absent from the school for 10 days already in just this semester. If he took any

more days off, it would impact both his grades and the way teachers view him. That's why even though he was reluctant, he left for school leaving his exhausted, sleeping little sister behind.

"...still, that Shio, what happened to her?"

"...maybe Taiga was too harsh and she decided to ignore you?"

"Uguu..."

No, the fact he couldn't rule out that possibility made him anxious.

"Is having to listen to someone's worries annoying after all..?"

'...well Rui-san was always listening to Fuyuki's chatter. I don't mind it~"

Although it seemed like she was in a good mood yesterday... but even trifling things could trigger a change of heart for better or worse.

...that Karasuba bunch, they really do pointless things.

Shio wasn't acknowledged by her family in the past. Although she slowly changed herself, with a single opportunity, she could step back into the darkness again.

An indescribable unease spread inside Taiga as he started to eat the breakfast Rui made.

Part 2

"Uunyaa... bright..."

A dazzling light entered through the gap in the window blinds, causing Fuyuki to move slightly.

Even though she tried to escape from the day by going back to sleep, after waking up her consciousness wouldn't fade away again. Her eyes opened little by little, eventually she shook off the temptation to stay in bed and rose up.

It seems like it's morning.

She opened the blinds using the room's remote control system. The sun was nearly at the peak, it seemed like it was noon.

"Eh... umm... why am I on the bed...?"

Still half asleep, she checked on her memories from last night.

She remembered programming until dawn, and the moment she completed it all the fatigue surged at the same time. 'Did I walk to bed while unconscious?' is what she considered, but she found something strange on the side deck.

"A rice ball...?"

She looked down from the king size bed, It was definitely a rice ball. It was wrapped to prevent it from drying up, and there was a piece of paper by its side on which was written 'Good job'.

"...Onii."

That's when she noticed, her long black hair was supposed to be in a mess because of work, but it was clean and neat instead.

"Fufu... he should have said so, I would've let him do it anytime."

Fuyuki tied her hair with a ribbon, preparing her usual twin tails and left the room while stuffing her cheeks with the rice ball.

There wasn't enough salt in it, and too much strength was put while shaping it, some parts of it were stiff,

"...delicious."

But when she thought her Brother prepared it for her, it was a great treat for her.

Since she didn't eat anything since last night, Fuyuki gobbled up three rice balls and checked the time. It was half past eleven.

Even if I went to school now, I would only make it for specialized course.

Since it was Monday, there were specialized courses in the afternoon. Honestly speaking, the specialized course she chose with Rui was boring and tedious. There should be no problems if she misses it once. However.

"...since Little Sister is absent, Brother and Rucchan are eating lunch together just the two of them..."

Also, they are eating Rui's homemade boxed lunch with their usual atmosphere like a pair of newlyweds.

When she thought of that, Fuyuki's heart was quickly filled with jealousy. The rice ball's taste disappeared from her mouth and frustration occupied her mind.

"Let's go after all. Letting brother be alone with a girl other than Little Sister is unforgivable."

Honestly, Rucchan was cute. She was incredibly cute.

She has cheat-level perfect style and an innocent personality——she seemed very attractive even from the point of view of other girls. One week ago she announced that she likes her Brother. Although it seems like she didn't confess yet, she continues to steadily shorten the distance between them.

Fuyuki quickly decided, returned to her room at a brisk pace and started to change into her school uniform.

Just when she finished changing and grabbed her bag, she received a e-mail.

"Aah, even though I'm in a hurry here, who is that from——...eh?"

Sender of the e-mail was——Karasuba Shio.

Fuyuki read the entire message in a hurry, then read it again for a second time.

〈"To Hime-chan. I have something I want to talk to you about. Can we meet now? I have written the coordinates indicating where you should come. I'll be waiting."〉

She looked through the briefly written message multiple times. The coordinates indicated it was in 《Aries》, but she didn't know that place. Fuyuki displayed the program she had just completed on the palm of her hand in the form of a bright purple crystal.

The program's name was——《Hydrangea Garden》.

"...this time, I won't run away."

She resolved herself, and quietly murmured.

In her hand, Fuyuki clenched the thing she couldn't give in the past and rushed to the dive room.

And after starting the Arclight, her consciousness dissolved in a sea of electrons.

——Her memories were confused.

In a world covered with silvery snow, Karasuba Shio was patiently waiting for a girl who was once her friend.

The snow was slowly falling down from the grey sky and piling up on the ground.

Blocks and pillars of ice were scattered around, although it seemed like the entire landscape was frozen, the temperature she felt was only to an extent of a chill despite wearing a hunter costume. That was probably because of a setting that protected players.

...a mysterious sensation.

A delicate white girl who could be mistaken for a snow spirit looked at the winter sky and exhaled while in a daze. Even the cold air wouldn't cool down the black emotions swirling in her heart.

Why did hatred fill her endlessly like that. Even Shio herself didn't know the source of these emotions. She had no memories from the time she separated from Taiga until this morning.

She didn't know where those feelings came from, but it was all the same to her.

Her body was engulfed with rage, she soaked in a darkness-like abyss and her heart cried out with only a single absolute purpose.

"——You came, Hime-chan."

"...it's been a long time, Shii-chan."

When she looked down again, there, blooming like an elegant flower on the snowy field was a single girl.

White and black——the two girls who met seven years earlier faced each other once again.

"Long time? Didn't we meet two days ago?"

"No, you got it wrong. Only now we have reunited for real."

"...fuun."

As the snow kept falling, their gazes intersected.

The eyes of the girl in a remodelled kimono were different from the other day, a strong will shone in them. Seeing these eyes, Shio ascertained her intent again——wanting to crush her.

"Did you resolve yourself?"

"Yeah. Little Sister won't run away again. I will properly end what started seven years ago, and become friends with Shii-chan again."

"....."

While Fuyuki was saying she's prepared, Shio reached out to the bow on her back and set it up. Then, after creating an arrow of ice, she immediately released it.

Cutting through the cold air, the arrow flew past Fuyuki while grazing her cheek and shattered upon striking the ice pillar behind her.

"Friends...? You left me to my worthless life, and you still say such a thing? That's pretty selfish of you."

Words of a complete rejection, but Fuyuki still didn't pull out even an inch.

"That's certainly true. But, I have decided. No matter how troublesome it is or how I am denied, I absolutely won't give up."

Just like how she was saved in the past.

"Hime-chan's feelings don't matter here. They're not related to me."

Fuyuki had said how she felt from the bottom of her heart. However, it didn't reach Shio who was dominated by hatred. She aimed another arrow towards Fuyuki and released it.

"I have only one goal. To get revenge on Hime-chan, because of you I suffered."

The meaning of her actions were clear. Fight with me, here and now——that's what Shio meant.

"...no. Little Sister didn't come here to do something so silly."

She was responded to with an arrow. Fuyuki dodged the arrow which flew straight towards her head in the nick of time.

"Silly...? You don't know how much I suffered, how much pain I went through, don't talk as if you know!!"

Her feelings overflowed, she released a heartbreaking cry. Seeing those unnaturally strong emotions, Fuyuki had a bad feeling.

"Let's fight. In order to regain the value of my existence, I will surpass Hime-chan."

Rough waves of deep, strong emotions. Hit by the negative emotions she tasted once already, even though she was scared, Fuyuki continued to look straight at Shio.

Fuyuki from seven years ago, escaped at this point. Unable to withstand the negative emotions, she abandoned Shio to protect herself.

"I'm sorry."

That's why, she definitely couldn't withdraw this time.

"...that so."

Responding to Fuyuki, Shio narrowed her eyes. A cold spine chilling glare, full of hatred and resentment concentrated on her, Fuyuki's heart made a creaking noise.

"Then it can't be helped. ...I'll have you fight me, even if I have to use force."

That moment, Shio moved.

She quickly created three arrows of ice and released them at the same time. Although Fuyuki dodged to the right Shio continued to shoot, following her.

"Kuu——Shii-chan! Please stop!"

She tried to convince her somehow while dodging the arrows, but she got no answer.

Instead, the rate of fire at which arrows were released increased, and finally Fuyuki was caught.

"Tsu——"

With her feet targeted, Fuyuki's movement dulled immediately.

Shio didn't miss that chance, she released an arrow that pierced through the sky blue eyes——before that happened, the arrow of ice was shattered by a crimson fan. Seeing what Fuyuki had in her hands, Shio's mouth distorted with satisfaction.

"You've finally drawn your weapon. Then, let's start."

"...Shii-chan."

The moment Shio aimed at her eye, Fuyuki understood. Her friend from the past, has stepped into a region from which she can't be taken back, she stepped into a place like that and cannot turn back.

"...so, there's no other choice but to fight?"

"That's right. Otherwise I won't be satisfied."

The words of denial she desired, discarded as if cut with a sword. Before Shio's last word reached her, Fuyuki already resolved herself.

"I understand. In that case——I won't hold back and will take you down."

She resolved herself, to fight with her.

With a flap of her remodelled kimono, Tenryo Fuyuki faced Karasuba Shio.

I feel bad for Shii-chan, but I'm going to finish it with a single blow.

Fuyuki didn't have even a speck of doubt of her victory.

It was obvious. It's been only two days since Shio started in 《Aries》. She was definitely a Rank D. On the other hand, she was a Rank B and had four years of experience. It would be another story if she had specs comparable to Taiga, but it was impossible with those thin limbs.

Fuyuki calmly started the calculations for the elemental sphere, however, she suddenly felt an unexpected chill.

Not good——Fuyuki momentarily changed the formula, and shattered two elemental spheres. She sidestepped with wind giving her acceleration from the side.

"——《Replicon》 initiate."

The next moment, a flash of light ran through the edge of Fuyuki's view.

Because Fuyuki didn't have an outstanding dynamic vision like Taiga, she couldn't see at all what was it that approached her at the speed of sound. But the scar gouged in the earth in a straight line indicated it was definitely an attack.

"...you... dodged it..."

Fuyuki barely avoided the silvery-white flash. When she looked behind her, there was a spear of ice. The ice spear's that was stuck in the snowy field was about as thick as a human body.

No way, did she just shoot that?!

And at a speed that made it indiscernible.

Fuyuki was startled, and on the other hand, despite releasing only one shot Shio's breathing got rough and sweat appeared on her forehead.

"Next one, let's go..."

Seeing Shio prepare another arrow of ice, Fuyuki moved taking an evasive action immediately.

She didn't consider defending, in order to stop it she probably would need a chain of three.

Fuyuki's attack-configured program 《Elemental Sphere》, it's a small attack-configured that used her own computing power improvising its characteristics, it took her more time to activate as the chain increased.

The difference between a chain of two and three was a second or less, but that difference could be fatal considering that arrow's speed.

Aiming for Fuyuki who tried to escape from the line of fire, Shio readied her arrow. She fixed her breath after her body was assaulted by pain in reaction to 《Replicon》's usage, and shot while holding her breath.

If Taiga was there, he would have seen it. The arrow Shio released from her hands rapidly expanded and accelerated during this process.

Even if she deliberately looked at it, it was so fast Fuyuki could only barely see the ice spear, it's aim was a bit off and it landed at her feet. The powdery snow the ground was covered with danced in the air because of shock, creating a white smokescreen.

This is bad. She can hit me anywhere with this...!!

The field of view was blocked by large amounts of snow.

Taking away the enemy's vision was a basic tactic. The response to an attack is delayed if you can't see it. And so, something flashed near the edge of her view.

"——!! Triple Spell(Three Coloured Chain) 《Steam Flare》!"

She immediately smacked three spheres, a red, blue and a white one. A shining white ball appeared in front of Fuyuki, it shrunk greatly and burst open as it was pushed away.

The shock wave and the ice spear were released at the same time and clashed. The engulfed ice spear shattered. As expected, the shock wave blew away the snow, and the ground was exposed in a circle around the explosion's location.

"As expected of you, I guess. I shot that with the intention of deciding this match, but it seems like this much isn't enough to take Hime-chan down."

"Shii-chan... just what did you do?!"

Shio set up the bow while being vigilant, and Fuyuki shouted in confusion.

It was impossible. She could understand if it was just 'an excellent attack-configured program'.

But after her vision was blocked, Shio moved to the edge of her view almost instantly.

Shio's original physical ability was bad and her rank wasn't high, she wasn't supposed to have such leg power

"There is no way to get that strong in such a short period of time in a legitimate way. Please answer me! What did you dabble in, Shii-chan!"

The response was another arrow. It was not the ice spear she released before, but its rate of fire was quite fast. Fuyuki took it all down with an armour of wind.



"That kind of thing doesn't matter does it? I will defeat Hime-chan, and regain the value of my existence. That is all."

These were words that came out of her mouth, however Shio was worried about that herself.

Something is wrong. There was something missing from the inside of her head——however, she didn't know what it was.

No, this is alright. I'm not in the wrong.

Shio threw away her doubts, and aimed the bow towards the sky. A crimson fiery arrow appeared in her hand.

"Let's go, Hime-chan!!"

Along with the yell, an arrow of flame headed towards the sky like a dragon.

The flame intensified as it increased its altitude, before long it looked like it stopped at a certain height.

"——— 《Meteor Rain》 !!!!"

And it split in the air into dozens of flame bullets which poured down on Fuyuki!

It's different from the ice arrows from before... they're guided missiles!

Although Fuyuki started running, the flame bullets freely changed their course and chased her.

She destroyed two white spheres and created a large number of wind blades, the fire bullets detected the blades and swiftly avoided them.

"Heey, that's troublesome..."

While running, she prepared an image to counter the fire arrow. Then she converted it into an improvised program, she fixed the data as three blue spheres and shattered them.

What manifested was a raging vortex. The wall of water surrounded Fuyuki from all directions and the flame bullets drowned in the water one after another.

"A return gift!!"

Fuyuki moved her fan, the water stream changed into the shape of a dozen water serpents and approached Shio with their pointed fangs.

There was no way to dodge, it was a simultaneous attack from all sides.

However, Shio moved like a real hunter, and rapidly dodged the water serpent and attacked while continuing to move. As expected she didn't have room to make a bold move, Fuyuki moved one of the water snakes to protect herself and took down the arrows flying towards her. Shio also looked for a chance to land an arrow on her, but couldn't find any.

Really persistent...

She didn't know why, but Shio's stats were equivalent to that of a rank A player's. And on top of that, her attack-configured program was pretty strong, an average player wouldn't be able to stand up to her.

Fuyuki's fighting style could be described as an artillery-type. She was a typical rear-guard.

Since she had poor specs even despite the rank correction, there was no way for her to get behind Shio as she couldn't move in explosive bursts of speed. No other choice, she had to use elemental spheres both offensively, and defensively and rely on her firepower. That was the best tactic in the current situation.

And in contrast, Shio was a guerilla-type.

She was a long-range type who took advantage of her mobility to disrupt the enemy attacks, a style of looking for opportunities to attack. Although it was a standard tactic to fight that enemy type, in Shio's case, she released powerful and bold blows instead.

They were both in a stalemate and none of them used any tricks——however, the equilibrium collapsed surprisingly soon.

It was sudden. Shio suddenly held her chest in severe pain..

"Ha——aa...ku——!!"

guwan, Shio's vision shook all at once. She screamed as her entire body was engulfed in pain, and her consciousness drifted away.

"Shii-chan?!"

Agitated by the fact Shio suddenly collapsed, Fuyuki reflexively run towards her.

But because of that, she didn't revoke the command given to the water snake, which attacked Shio according to the last instruction it was given.

"Dam——avoid it!"

Immediately after Fuyuki cried out, the water snake swallowed Shio and exploded.

A large amount of water splashed out and soared into the air, before pouring down in the form of rain.

Each of the rain droplets didn't have much power, but if all of them overlapped, they caused an enormous amount of damage.

It was definitely fatal. Fuyuki showed a pain expression as she worried about Shio, and headed towards her in a hurry. However——

"...not yet, the match... is still on!!"

On the other side of the curtain made of water, there was Shio who had a smile despite the fact there was an expression of anguish on her face. The stamina gauge that appeared above her head——it had barely decreased at all.

"Wha...!!"

A normal player, no, even an A-Ranked player would have his HP reduced to half by that attack.

No matter how you looked at it, her durability was too high.

"—— 《Partisan》 !"

The next moment, a spear of ice accelerated and penetrated through Fuyuki's small body.

Part 3

——*kin-kon-kan-kon*

Fourth period, the class for the subject he was worst at, modern Japanese ended. Taiga turned off the electronic textbook and collapsed on the desk, exhausted.

"Ahh〜I'm exhausted〜"

"Taiga is really bad at modern Japanese. Midterm tests are coming soon, is it all right?"

"...honestly. It's not all right at all."

The results for the small test came back today, and he was almost in red. That was the result of his poor performance on top of being absent from school. By the way, since they are siblings, he received Fuyuki's test results as well, she had full marks even though she was absent for as long as Taiga. He wondered where did this difference come from.

"Come on, how am I supposed to understand the feelings of the characters. Go ask the author himself for that."

"Ahaha..."

They were demanding too much.

Taiga was good at memorization, but he was bad at other fundamentals. He didn't have many opportunities to come in contact with books when he was a child, he couldn't think of something like that. Before, he lived while mainly relying on his intuition.

"Well, let's leave it for now. Rather than that, let's go eat lunch."

"Ah, yup. But since it's raining we can't use the rooftop? Shall we eat in the classroom we are in now?"

"That's right... uh, wait a moment."

There was a call incoming to his terminal. Taiga left Rui in the classroom and moved to another place indifferently, and frowned after seeing the caller's name.

"...what is it Haya?"

〈"You seem like your in a bad mood. Do you hate speaking with me face-to-face that much?"〉

"That's because whenever you call me, it never turns out to be anything good."

〈"I won't deny that."〉

Haya whom he saw on the screen wore a suit she didn't look good in, he's seen her in that outfit once before. The scenery behind her was not the classroom's, it seems like she didn't come to school.

"Student council president playing hooky?"

〈"It's called sick leave. If I seriously do this on regular basis, I can avoid having people pry in my matters at times like these."〉

It's not being serious, its pretend. Is what he thought but didn't say.

"So, did something happen?"

〈"Oh, right. About Angel, because there was something that worried me I performed a scan on all virtual bodies in 《Aries》 when I had some spare time from research and I located two strange reactions."〉

"Strange reactions?"

〈"Yeah. On top of that, they didn't log out ever since last night. Well, that in itself isn't so rare, but with this timing it got me worried. One of them ceased to exist in the morning so I recovered its distributed data. And then, well, it seems like the structure of the virtual body itself changed."〉

"...make it a bit easier to understand."

He wanted her to finally take into consideration who it is she's talking with.

〈"In a nutshell, the virtual body was remodelled. No, to be exact it's more like it was compressed rather than remodeled. The density of the data making up the virtual body was abnormally high."〉

The virtual body was also made of data. Of course it was possible to interfere with it.

However, since virtual bodies could affect the human body in reality, the security was top class. It shouldn't be that easy to interfere with it.

"And what does higher density mean?"

〈"They get incredibly strong. The virtual body itself is enhanced, and not only the athletic abilities but also reflexes improve. In exchange for hellish pain."〉

"Pain? Doesn't Elysion(Cyber World) block the pain?"

〈"There's a rule that says it only applies to normal virtual bodies. It's different when it's modified. There's no need to protect a guy who's using an illegal one. And so, that compression process, it should feel like your body was being crushed into one thousandth of its size."〉

"That... sounds painful."

Just by imagining Haya's example covered him with goosebumps, Taiga pulled his cheek to feel the pain.

From what I've heard, it seems like an atrocious program similar to 《Synchro Infinity》

Although both hacked into the virtual body, that program was messing with the virtual body's configuration itself. In contrast to it, the program Fuyuki made for Taiga, 《Synchro Infinity》 simply disabled all the extra features.

In the first place the 'structural ability compensation' was unnecessary for Taiga and instead became an obstacle when it came to tuning his virtual body, of course they were different.

〈"I'm telling that to you because it seems related to Angel. Well then, continue the investigation."〉

"Hey hey..."

She ended the call before Taiga could reply properly. It's not time to do that now, is what he wanted to say to her.

"...I want to become a person who can say 'no.'"

"I think that's impossible."

The words he said without thinking were denied from behind him. Behind him was Rui who couldn't stand waiting, and came closer to him with a smile.

"That's because Taiga is too kind, and one way or another he ends up getting pulled in."

"I'm aware of that so you don't have to tell me... nn? Was that an e-mail?"

He opened the window thinking it's Haya again. But, instead 《Unknown》 was written on the field of the sender's name.

At first Taiga put on a puzzled expression.

First of all, he could count out all the people who knew his contact information on the fingers of both hands, he didn't remember advertising his mail address anywhere. This kind of mail shouldn't have arrived.

"《Unknown》? It looks like it contains a video file."

Rui was looking into it from the side, she tilted her head after seeing the mail.

Hesitatingly, Taiga started the video from the file by touching it. After it started he saw something like white powder flying around, the video quality was far from perfect.

——And there, Fuyuki fought with Shio, the entire thing was captured with details.

"...what's...this?"

Fuyuki wearing a remodelled kimono manipulated a water snake, Shio who was wearing a hunter costume released arrows of fire and ice while moving around——it was a sight completely different from what he envisioned, Taiga was dumbfounded.

"It was taken... twenty seconds ago?! This is pretty much real time!"

The video cut off as the spear of ice Shio released pierced through Fuyuki.

"——!!"

As soon as the playback ended, Taiga started to run. Rui also followed him in a hurry.

"Taiga, where are you going?!"

"That's obvious! I'm going home right now, and go to that place——!!"

"Then you won't make it. It might be all over before you arrive there!"

Hearing these calm words, Taiga stopped his legs just as he was about to jump from the window.

Certainly, going home from this place would take time even if he hurried. Since it was noon, there weren't many linears running, in fact it would delay him even more.

"It would be faster to use one of the Arclights in here. There's the information room that's open during the lunch break, let's hide there."

"...no, there's a better place."

"Eh?"

A place where no one enters and there's no time restrictions, the best place there is.

He took a deep breath calming down his frustration. It was not the time to take extra detours. He had to calmly arrive at his destination in the shortest time possible.

"Rui, do you know where's the location we've seen on the video?"

"It's probably the deepest part of the snowy field near the central city. We can go there directly since there's a move point."

"All right... let's go!"

"Ey eyy——um, where?"

Taiga started to run at a reduced speed, allowing Rui to catch up and contacted Haya through the terminal.

〈"What is it, Taiga? Maybe you got anything on——"〉

"We'll talk about that later! If I remember well you had an Arclight in your classroom right!"

〈"What's up all of a sudden? ...I have two in there. They're my personal belongings."〉

"I'm borrowing them for a moment!"

"Ha?! Wait a moment, that's my important collection——"

Although it seemed like she was saying something, Taiga ended the call already. They entered the unused school building and ran to the unused classroom in its very back.

"It should be somewhere here... there they are!"

"Woaa～ This is Namisagi's unique model!! It's an incredibly rare Arclight! Why is there such a thing here?"

"As long as we can hide, anything is fine!"

Taiga linked his terminal with the headgear that had a characteristic shape and leaned his back deeply on the sofa. Rui sat down next to Taiga, and after setting the coordinates the two of them closed their eyes at the same time.

""——Dive Start!""

They felt dizzy for a moment. Their mind and body structure turned into data, and faded as it was being incorporated into a virtual body.

After they opened their eyes again, they were outside, on a silvery white field with snow falling down. In the centre, they could see a black and a white girl.

"Fuyuki!!"

Taiga started running towards where Fuyuki was kneeling with an ice spear piercing through her. But suddenly he heard the sound of someone snapping his fingers and smashed his head into a space that should have nothing in it.

"Ouchh... what's this?!"

When he reached out, he felt his fingers touch something hard. Some kind of invisible wall was spread around, it didn't budge at all when he pressed on it.

"Taiga, what is it?"

"I can't go any further! What's up with this?!"

An invisible wall seemed to be stretched and the two couldn't get any closer to Fuyuki. Taiga pulled out the nodachi, attempting to break through by force.

"——That won't work. There is no way you guys could break this wall."

They heard a voice from above.

Taiga directed the tip of his sword towards where the voice came from.

About ten metres away there were huge icicles, on top of them was a virtual body that wore a white cloak which covered it completely from head to toes.

"...who are you bastard?"

"Oh right. If I said I'm the existence you are looking for, would you understand?"

Thinking his roundabout words were just evading, Taiga's frowned. He lowered his body and put a hand on the nodachi's hilt.

"...hurry up and answer. If not, I'll cut your head off."

"Scary scary. What, having to introduce myself the same way three times in such a short period of time is troublesome. I already did it in a roundabout manner. —Please call me 'Angel' for the time being. If it's you, you should know me right? Tenryo Taiga."

Taiga was surprised that he smoothly accepted the fact his name was known. He probably instinctively knew it already.

——That this guy, was Tenryo Taiga's enemy.

"Is this wall your doing?"

"That's right. I would be troubled if you interfered with this fight. You should remain as bystanders at least until this fight is settled."

As Angel and Taiga glared at each other, explosions resounded throughout the field of snow.

The flame bullet divided in the sky and poured down on the ground like a meteor shower. Fuyuki whose HP was already down to half intercepted them with a variety of elemental spheres.

"Taiga, I think this wall was made with use of 《Master Code(Administrative Privileges)》. It can't be destroyed from the outside."

"...is that so."

Rui whispered that to him after examining the wall. It seemed like communication was cut off as well, there was no response when he called Fuyuki's terminal.

"You get it now, right? The fact you can't do anything."

Reluctantly Taiga took his hand off the nodachi's hilt and glared at Angel whose mouth distorted. There was no way he heard that.

"Let me ask you one thing. You, what did you do to Shio?"

"By what, you mean?"

"Don't play dumb. Shio's movement is not normal. I can tell, you modified her virtual body... that's what I want to hear about. Why is Shio fighting Fuyuki? There were better ways to resolve this."

"I wonder. Your words are irresponsible and don't have any value. She changed her feelings on her own. No, she was hiding her real feelings. That's why—I just pushed her back a little."

"...pushed her back?"

"I didn't do much. I just erased some of the emotions that disturbed her, like kindness, or compassion."

"Wha...?!!"

Erased her emotions—hearing Angel say it so simply, Taiga and Rui were at a loss for words. Anger immediately welled up in them.

"You bastard, do you even understand what you did?!"

"I just pulled out the true feelings that were inside of her. Karasuba Shio definitely held a grudge against Tenryo Fuyuki, her feelings of wanting to be acknowledged by someone. I just lent her a hand."

"You're wrong! Certainly they may be her true feelings. But that's not all! She definitely had feelings of wanting to be friends with Fuyuki too! That's also a part Karasuba Shio consists of! What you bastard did, is just brainwashing!"

"That's just a different point of view."

The Angel looked down on him, and Taiga who looked up at Angel.

Neither of them would back down on their thoughts, they realized that immediately from the look in the other's eyes.

"I have no intention of arguing with you in the first place. Anyway, you can only watch until it's settled between those two——right?"

He didn't like it, but it was just as Angel said.

Regardless of what form it takes, these two decided to face each other again. That means the rest is a problem of Tenryo Fuyuki and Karasuba Shio. It wasn't something Taiga should step into.

"...Taiga."

"...I know. Let's leave Shio to Fuyuki. She resolved herself to stand in front of Shio."

He slowly told that to himself. He suppressed the frustration coming from the fact that he couldn't do anything, and glared at Angel again.

"Do you have anything else to say?"

"Yeah... just so you know. If you dare to interfere with these two again—I'll cut off your arms, legs and your head, I'll cut you all apart."

What Angel felt, was intimidation that felt like it crushed its body.

It was a thirst for blood any human with decent sensitivity could feel, Angel unconsciously stepped back.

Taiga returned his gaze to the girls who continued to fight.

"...do your best, Fuyuki."

He murmured the words that couldn't reach, as his sky blue eyes watched over the battlefield.

Part 4

"——— 《Steam Flare》 !"

Numerous flaming bullets poured down like meteorites, Fuyuki blew all of them away with a steam explosion.

She invoked another image from her head immediately, and right after she destroyed a single sphere with a dance-like motion.

A lump of earth emerged from the ground in the shape of a hand and received the rotating spear.

Although the arrow was strong enough to penetrate through the mass of soil, it lost its momentum before it hit Fuyuki and faded away together with the lump of earth.

"Haa... haa..."

After continuously using elemental sphere, Fuyuki started to breathe roughly.

The amount of elemental spheres she generated was already beyond fifty. Although Fuyuki had an enormous computing power far beyond normal people, she was starting to see her limits.

"Haa... aa...guu..."

However, her opponent, Shio was pushed even further.

During the intense battle her body was hit by the pain from 《Replicon》 and she used bold moves like 《Meteor Rain》 or 《Partisan》——Shio was already at her limit.

She's already been hit by elemental sphere many times, and now just fought by relying on her exceptional durability. The fight was leaning in favor of Fuyuki.

"Let's stop this already, Shii-chan... if you continue at this rate you will..."

"Not...yet... the match isn't over...."

It was clear as a day who will be the one to use up all their energy first. Even Shio herself knew that.

Even so, Shio set up the bow.

I... why am I so desperate?

As the battle continued, Shio questioned herself.

The burning hatred that occupied her mind was already receding. Her heart and mind regained enough composure to wonder what was that fiery passion that occupied her body.

Nevertheless, she didn't stop fighting.

Yeah, I see now. I——

Any chance was good. Any reason was good.

She just wanted someone she could push her feelings on, she wanted someone to be with her.

Just—to have someone praise her, she would be happy with that.

"——Cryoflare!!!!!"

"Square Spell(Quadruple Chain)—— 《Lævateinn》 !!!!!!"

An arrow clad in both ice and flame clashed with a gigantic flaming sword, the swirling heat and cold gouged the earth all around.

They struggled for a moment, there was just a slight difference in power, but the flame sword broke through the arrow of ice and flame.

The raging crimson flame swallowed Shio and started running amok. At that moment the pain from 《Replicon》 engulfed her entire body, and Shio fell to the ground.

I can't... win...

What she saw as her field of view flashed, was the appearance of Fuyuki standing gracefully among the fire and ice.

She's so cool...

What she always longed for. What she's been always jealous of.

She was jealous of the girl who easily stepped into an area she couldn't reach, she was always proud of having her as a friend—she always wanted to go over there, even dreamt of it.

Just one thing, she just wanted to have her friend by her side forever, she wanted to be acknowledged, and in the end she ended up frustrated and alone.

She shook off the pain and stood up and she chanted once again.

"... 《Replicon》 Initiate."

The forbidden spell.

Next moment, Shio was hit by a severe pain incomparable to the one she felt at first. Her vision lost colours, her sense of touch went wrong. Although she screamed loud enough to tear her eardrums, her hearing didn't recognize it.

Cells throughout her entire body creaked. Not allowing her consciousness to fade, pain crawled through her entire body.

Despite that, Shio readied her bow.

"Why... is it... why does Shii-chan go this far...?"

Despite everything being covered with noise, for some reason Shio heard it clearly, and relied on her voice to aim. She could barely see anything with her eyes already.

She was about to pass out because of the severe pain anytime now but she endured it, and slowly pulled an arrow with a shaking hand.

A pale fire and cold air continued to converge rapidly, and the bow began to crackle.

"Why is it... I have always admired Hime-chan. I kept chasing after Hime-chan's back... but, I didn't have talent."

That's why she rejected it. One day she will look down on her——when she thought of that, she couldn't stop any longer. She wouldn't be acknowledged by her only friend, and would really become a worthless existence.

——With that she turned into a coward, she couldn't accept her weak self.

"I decided to change myself. I decided to change my life of falling deeper down and rotting away! It doesn't matter whether I win or lose. I need to settle Hime-chan's and my past. I need to do it, otherwise I won't be able to move forward even a single step!!!"

That's why Karasuba Shio fought.

It didn't matter how hard and painful it was.

In order to break with her past, in order to start living again——Karasuba Shio bet everything she had, and fought against Tenryo Fuyuki.

"...Shii-chan."

As Shio shouted, Fuyuki finally saw the real 'Karasuba Shio'.

She didn't change at all. Shio pretended to have forgotten about the bitter past. The one who was supposed to have moved forward before Tenryo Fuyuki, Karasuba Shio has been struggling for seven years and didn't change in the least.

...it looks like Little Sister doesn't have enough resolve yet.

Fuyuki started the terminal and extracted a single program from it. A crystal glowed with seven constantly changing colours—the program that she created, which broke the wall between fiction and reality, 《Synchro Infinity》.

Shio challenged her while betting all she had.

In order to reward her for that, in order to change herself, Fuyuki responded by betting everything as well.

"In order to move forward——let's put an end to the past here."

The seven-coloured crystal shattered.

There were slight differences between the virtual and the real body. The last shackle binding the computing power that was called exceptional by one of four major corporates 'Karasuba' was destroyed.

"...dance."

Fuyuki held out the fan towards the sky, and tens of white elemental spheres appeared and danced in the sky looking like a blizzard.

Surrounding them were red, blue, yellow, green and other countless elemental spheres orbited around like a satellite.

Her thinking circuits screamed as she used parallel processing beyond the limit. Even so, Fuyuki continued to increase the amount of elemental spheres—and eventually completed a celestial chart decorated with countless stars.

There was no way to dodge, they had no strength to spare to do that after preparing the blow.

They put everything they had into this single strike—and both of them unleashed it at the same time!

"Unlimited Spell(Maximum Chain)——"

"——CRYOFLAREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE!!!!"

"—— 《Stellar Wiper》!!!!"

The arrow clad in absolute zero temperature and an extreme inferno clashed with massive energy amassed by the stars—and the arrow was crushed in a blink of an eye.

...finally——"

Shio's field of view was gradually covered with pure white light.

I can finally move forward...

A giant shining star swallowed Shio, and an explosion roared upon the impact. A tremendous shock wave began to destroy the earth.

The tremors subsided, and snow began to fall again from the winter sky after the everything went silent again.

"Haa...! Haa...!!"

It looked like a miserable wilderness with no sign of the snowy field anywhere, Fuyuki proceeded with a wobbly gait. Pain rampaged inside of her head, even walking was hard for her.

She used a rock that was averted by Stellar Wiper(Star Bombing) as a handrail, and she walked step after step towards where Shio has collapsed.

"I can't... fall over... yet..."

Fuyuki spat out those words, ordering her own body.

And——she reached.

"Shii—...chan..."

"...it's my utter defeat, Hime-chan."

Shio collapsed with her back towards the ground, as if what possessed left her, she was looking at the sky with a refreshing expression. The attack-configured program 《Cryoflare》 shattered, it turned into light and faded away.

"With this, it's all over... I wonder, where did we go wrong?"

"Our relationship was irregular to begin with. Both Little Sister and Shii-chan were lonely, and we overlapped each other. So when it was

betrayed, it felt like all of it was denied. Even if it didn't happen at that time, some day it would have collapsed anyway."

Fuyuki who lost her family and Shio who wasn't acknowledged by her family. They only looked for a substitute. A convenient fantastical presence they could push it all on.

"Is that so... we were destined to end up like this..."

"——That's wrong."

Fuyuki denied outright Shio's words of realization.

"I won't acknowledge such destiny. Indeed, we have ended everything just now. However, I have no intention of saying goodbye like this."

Fuyuki manifested a purple-coloured crystal from her terminal, and held it out towards Shio.

"What's...this...?"

"Although I had to wait for seven years, I can finally pass it to you—— 《Activate》 ."

In response to her instruction, the crystal's body floated in the air and gave off a dazzling shine.

Shio closed her eyes because of the glitter.

What tickled her nostrils in the darkness, was the familiar smell that was always drifting in her room at all times.

A rain-like damp smell, a delicate fragrance of flowers putting her heart at ease.

"Ah——"



What entered her eyes, was the sight of Hydrangea spreading in every direction.

A vast amount of purple flowers bloomed on the desolate land forming a circle around them. There were more than a hundred or two hundreds Hydrangeas, and they covered the snowy land, producing a rich flower garden.

That was the sight she was supposed to see seven years ago. It was what the young Fuyuki had created for her friend, something she left behind in the past.

It was what was supposed to connect the two girls, the 《Hydrangea Garden》.

"...I've always wanted to apologize to Shii-chan."

Fuyuki crouched beside Shio and matched her line of sight with hers. The sky-blue eyes were filled with tears, the transparent droplets fell down and hit the Hydrangea one after another.

"Little Sister didn't realize that she increased Shii-chan's suffering. She hurt Shii-chan. If she faced Shii-chan instead of running away to protect herself, Shii-chan wouldn't have to suffer for so long... I'm really sorry."

"Hime-chan always encouraged me right... it was me who got jealous and turned myself into a mess. Hime-chan didn't do anything bad."

At first it was just a small rip.

But it gradually expanded as a variety of factors overlapped, and before she noticed it was too late. When it was disconnected once already, she could no longer do anything.

"The one who really should apologize is me. I couldn't act honestly, and could only display my feelings and ended this in a form like this... looks like, our relationship was a mistake——"

"——In that case, let's start again."

"...eh?"

However, that's not an 'end'.

"So what if we made a mistake once. Let's start over again. This time let's support each other, and become real friends. That's why——Shii-chan, please be Little Sister's friend."

These entire seven years, she was always lonely.

She gave up on herself, and holed up in a shell.

That's why——as she stretched out her hand, what could be seen in Karasuba Shio's eyes, were tears of happiness.

"...are you fine... with me?"

"No one but Shii-chan will do."

Slowly, the two girls' hands overlapped.

I won't let go of you again——Fuyuki prayed in her mind and hugged Shio.

Feeling the warmth of human skin she has forgotten, the presence of a person who requires her, large tears overflowed from Shio's eyes.

"Uuu...Uaaa...UWAaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa...!!"

The matter that's been ongoing for seven years, was finally solved.

"——Sorry to intrude on your friendship-play, but it's about time I fulfilled my goal."

At that time, a voice resounded.

"Who——uaa!?"

It was already too late when she noticed, suddenly a white shadow appeared in front of her eyes, and Fuyuki was literally kicked away before rolling on the ground.

"Hime-chan!!"

"Seriously, could you not show me these kinds of pointless things? My mood's gotten worse because of that. Things like friendship or compassion, I hate them the most."

While spitting out selfish words, Angel put its hand on Shio's head who couldn't move.

"W-who are you?! Why did you kick Hime-chan——?!"

"It seems like your memory was erased properly... don't worry. I have no use for Tenryo Fuyuki. Her role was only to help this one grow——
『Wake up』."

The moment she heard those words, Shio's body started to tremble violently. Her eyes lost their light and strength left her limbs, she collapsed to the ground.

"Shii-chan! Shii-chan!"

"Now everything is ready... before we begin, let's get rid of the obsolete tool."

Fuyuki called out desperately, but Shio didn't move even an inch.

After looking down on Shio contently, Angel approached Fuyuki.

Because of 《Synchro Infinity》's recoil Fuyuki couldn't move and only glared as Angel's right hand outstretched towards her head——and that arm was cut off by a flash of steel.

"...oh?"

"I've told you... that if you try to interfere I'm going to cut off your limbs!!"

Angel looked at his severed right arm in amazement, momentarily Taiga broke between the two and rotated his whole body and slashed with his nodachi at Angel's neck.

That blow should have easily cut his neck. But the forceful slash from nodachi didn't hit anything, and only cut air. He instantly looked back, and saw Angel's figure appear behind Fuyuki.

"As if I'd let you!!"

Angel aimed for Fuyuki again, but Rui who was slightly late, hurled a blade towards him.

It was a perfect attack from a blind spot——but Angel's figure disappeared again, and the blade exploded after striking stone and Hydrangeas.

"Shit, he disappeared again!"

"That's 《Quick Move》 . A Master Code(Administrative Privileges) command."

"Brother, Rucchan... why are you here?"

Fuyuki was surprised by this sudden development, they should have been at school at the moment. And she wondered how did they know about this place however, the two couldn't afford to answer.

"We'll talk later. Rather than that, this guy——"

"So what will you do about me?"

He looked towards where the voice came from, Angel was standing on top of an ice pillar. Even though he lost one of his arms, he was smiling without care.

"However, you really are fast, Tenryo Taiga. I didn't think you would travel that distance in a matter of seconds. I'm glad I made the preparations."

Angel had a really surprised tone of voice. His unscathed left hand touched the place where he was cut, and the arm that should have been cut off was restored.

"...a teleport ability. You sure got some pain in the ass abilities."

"On the other hand I knew you are the opponent. And I have taken measures accordingly. And yet I lost an arm because I was careless for a moment, even though I knew just how fast you are."

Again. He talked as if he knew about Taiga beforehand.

"...what's your goal?"

Taiga said those words while releasing a killing intent, but it didn't disturb Angel's antics.

"Whaat, it's just a little experiment. There's quite a few conditions. And you guys were considered optimal."

"Even if we don't want to take part in the experiment?"

"We won't let you get any closer to Fuyuki or Shio-chan."

Both Taiga and Rui prepared themselves to take their prey. If he moves even a single step they will immediately attack him, but Angel had an undisturbed smile on its face.

It was obvious.

"——Unfortunately, it's already too late."

Because he had already did what he had to.

He snapped his fingers. The sound was transferred through the air and eventually entered Shio's trembling eardrums, activating what was waiting within her.

"Shii-chan?!!"

The two looked back after hearing an extraordinary cry, something that looked like a black liquid oozed out from Shio's body. The moment it came in contact with that cloudy and muddy liquid which looked like tar, Hydrangeas withered one after another.

"Wh-what's that?!"

The liquid that oozed out of Shio started bubbling and foaming, eventually it converged into a single fixed form.

Two meters tall, clad in a jet black armour that looked like darkness incarnated. It held a huge hatchet that required two hands to use, and which specialized in cutting enemies apart.

A creepy black miasma was emitted from its black body as the black knight stood in front of the three.

"Well then, experiment start——eat your fill 《Zygote》. There's food in front of you."

In response to Angel's voice, the jet black armour rumbled.

"——!! Rui, I leave Shio to you!"

"Okayy!!"

At the same time as the black knight, both Taiga and Rui jumped.

Taiga pulled away from the darkness-like substance the black knight emitted, and picked up Fuyuki who couldn't move even a single step.

"Brother, behind!!"

"I know!"

Taiga felt the presence of the black knight approaching him from behind and jumped to the side with all his might while holding Fuyuki.

He barely made it. The hatchet slammed into where Fuyuki was lying a moment before, and the bedrock below cracked.

He did that with just one arm...

Taiga looked at the crudely cut location with a pained expression on his face.

Originally, a hatchet was made for cutting apart weeds and branches. Although this one's size was far from ordinary, it was unheard of to have something like that break the ground.

The black knight's movement didn't stop. He rotated his large body rapidly and tried to cleave Taiga.

"Tch!!"

Although Taiga defended with the nodachi, he could only use one hand because he held Fuyuki in the other.

Even though he managed to parry the incoming blade somehow, because of the superhuman strength behind the blow he was flung about ten metres away.

The black knight didn't miss that opportunity and followed up, but that's when a dozen of blades pierced through him and exploded with a flash.

"Over here!"

Rui called from a blind spot that was located behind a rock. They used the chance as the black knight hesitated, and headed to where Shio lied who was breathing heavily.

"Shii-chan is?!"

"She's barely conscious, but she can't move. She should have been logged out immediately... but it's been sealed."

Rui activated the log out process from the terminal, but the window disappeared after displaying an error. It seemed like they aren't allowed to escape.

"Damn, it seems like we need to fight that black guy. Fuyuki, hide together with Shio over here. I'll beat this guy together with Rui."

"Please wait, Little Sister will too——"

"Fuyuki can't move yet right? Also, someone has to look after Shio-chan."

"Don't worry, there's no way we'll lose."

He poked her head lightly, then jumped out together with Rui from behind the rock.

Even though he was directly hit by a dozen of blades, the black knight was almost uninjured. The two rushed at 《Zygote》 from the front.

"Let's end this quickly! Rui, create a diversion, I'll peel off that armour of his!"

"Got it!!"

The black knight released a creepy roar, and Rui hurled the creation stones. Eight creative stones transformed into blades in mid-air and half of them hit the jet black armour, the other half landed under the knight's feet. As a result, the enemy's posture broke down.

Using that opportunity, Taiga closed the distance. He barely made it and crawled under the black knight before raising his body and cutting upwards with his nodachi!

"Renjou Sword Technique, seventh form—— 《Senran(Battle Tempest)》 !"

The attack-configured program 《Heavenly Sword》 was clad in a windstorm, cutting the armour of darkness as if it was made of paper, cutting off the knight's right arm . Black miasma flowed from the cut's surface, and part of its armour was shattered.

That's when the creative stones under knight's feet jumped up, and Rui hurled another six at him.

"Unison Creation—— 《Brionac》 !"

The creative stones released light as they connected and formed a circle from which countless light bullets were released, and it shot the collapsing armour like a machine gun. The black knight was partially destroyed, but the attack wasn't over yet.

"Flash, fourth form 《Raijin(Lightning)》 !!"

Using the momentum left behind by the seventh form where he raised his sword, Taiga twisted his whole body.

And then he swung down with his blade wearing a purple lightning, and then after changing the direction he delivered a final blow to the enemy whose armour was destroyed by 《Senran(Battle Tempest)》, the fourth form 《Raijyuji(Lightning Cross)》 exploded and cut the black knight's body.

On top of having its entire body shot with a machine gun, a lightning fast two strikes cut 《Zygote》 into four pieces, and it rolled on the ground.

"Despite all that effort, it seems like a pretty fragile doll. Angel."

Taiga made sure the black knight wasn't moving before sheathing his nodachi and glared at Angel who was watching over the fight from a high place. However, after seeing his pawn being destroyed, Angel started to clap giving them an applause.

"...what's up with your reaction."

"It's all right if I give you a honest round of applause right? I already knew you were strong, but to think Saionji Rui was that strong as well. I was right to choose you guys."

"We already destroyed that knight of yours right? How do you intend to continue your experiment?"

"Destroyed, huh. ———If you think you won after dismantling it into four pieces, then you are too naive."

"What?"

The Angel said so, and then it happened.

"——AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAaaaaaaa?!"
!!!"

A scream sounded.

Taiga and Rui looked back, and they saw Shio suffering and wriggling on the ground. And her right arm seemed to be eroded starting from her fingertips, becoming black smoke.

"Shii-chan, Shii-chan!! Please get a hold of yourself!"

Fuyuki was calling out to her desperately, however Shio was in severe pain as her body was falling apart, and couldn't articulate anything.

In a blink of an eye, the miasma ate her arm up to the elbow and after leaving her body it was sucked into the black knight. It covered the wounds and soon after it took the form of an armoured knight again, it was restored in just a few seconds. No, he stood up looking even more terrifying.

"Bastard, what did you do?!"

"It's not that complicated. I decomposed Karasuba Shio's virtual body and repaired 《Zygote》's damaged portion, also I just strengthened its armour to accommodate your attacks. Well, she's feeling pain equal to if her arm was ripped off, I guess?"

"Just how long do you intend to use Shio!!!"

"Though it's unfortunate, it doesn't matter even if her heart is broken and she becomes a cripple. As long as my goal is achieved."

"That's... horrible..."

Hearing how Angel uses people as tools anger boiled inside of him, Taiga unsheathed the nodachi and jumped. However, the black knight stood in his way.

"Out of my——"

"Hee, is that really fine? If it's destroyed, I will use Karasuba Shio's virtual body to make it recover you know? Maybe next time her main body disappears?"

"Guh...!"

Shio's suffering and her screams passed through his thoughts and Taiga stopped the nodachi which was heading towards its neck. That moment the black knight swung its hatchet downwards and blew Taiga away in a fancy manner.

"Taiga!!!"

Rui cried out and ran up to him. Taiga instantly stood up and took a defensive posture, but his health was cut down to nearly 30%.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah—he's coming!"

The massive armour plunged straight towards them, the two held up their weapons in response.

"But what do we do?! If we attack it, Shio-chan will...!!!"

"Let's keep avoiding it for the time being! We absolutely can't counterattack!!"

"Ahahahahaha!! I think you know it already, but if Karasuba Shio loses her entire virtual body, she will definitely break! Come on, dance until you hit your limit!"

Taiga and Rui freely ran around the Hydrangea Garden while avoiding the roaring hatcher that cleaved at them.

Even though they knew that eventually they'll be caught, there was no other choice than that.

They had no choice but to plunge into this hopeless struggle.

"Brother, Rucchan...!"

She couldn't just continue to look at the two avoiding the hatchet, Fuyuki bit her lips. From Shio's body which lied next to her an arm and a leg were already gone.

"!!——again...!!"

Miasma crawled through Shio's body again. This time it swallowed her ankle and assimilated into 《Zygote》, the armour changed into an even more atrocious form, and the black knight's speed also increased.

The black knight seemed to be set up so that he's getting reinforced automatically, he's already been enhanced several times. Even though the two didn't attack, Shio's virtual body was being eaten away at—and destroyed.

Because of the repeated 'exploitation' Shio was breathing with a hoarse voice as she was attacked by severe pain.

"I need to do something, anything...!!"

It was the worst situation.

They couldn't escape, and they couldn't even buy time. She needed to do something about that 'exploitation'——

...wait a second. How does it absorb Shii-chan virtual body in the first place...?

When her thinking circuits finally calmed down, that one question appeared in her head.

Repairing other programs with data taken from virtual bodies' structure was possible.

However, on top of remotely interfering with Shio's virtual body, there was some kind of trick allowing to manipulate it from a distance. It was far beyond the area of autonomously activated program.

Is there some kind of circuit that links him and Shii-chan...? But, there's nothing like that here...

If there is a circuit, it should have taken a shape inElySION(Cyber World). But no matter how she strained her eyes, she couldn't find the circuit connecting her with the black knight.

In that case, there was only one possibility.

If there's no circuit then they are connected directly....!!

Fuyuki immediately hacked into Shio's terminal, and reflected her virtual body's structure in a window. If she was right, then it should be there.

"...got it!"

She found something that shouldn't be in Shio's virtual body, a very, very small virus.

"He was definitely on the mark by calling it Zygote..."

In other words, it was a colony-type program.

It was incorporated into the virtual body data and then fused itself with it, infesting it with a virus. The virus continued to grow little by little inside of Shio's body, and then escaped from the host when ordered by Angel. Some of them were left behind in her body.

The leftover infection activated when its body took damage, it uses the virtual body's structure to rewrite its data and uses it to repair its missing parts.

If she knows its mechanic, she can create a remedy for it.

"I need to eliminate all of the Zygotes in Shii-chan's body...!"

If she does that, it won't be able to recover any more and Shio's virtual body will no longer be erased. Fuyuki immediately hacked into Shio's virtual body to eliminate the foreign matter——and froze.

〈"Search results——400 matches found."〉

".....four...hundred...?"

No matter how she looked at it, there was too much. No, there problem didn't lie there.

〈"Matches, 457, 471, 484....."〉

In just a second, the number of Zygotes increased more and more.

There was no point erasing them one after another like this. She won't return to normal unless she erases all the Zygotes at once. But hacking into a virtual body was incredibly difficult. Moreover, processing five hundred of them at once was an area beyond what human could do.

"Uuu...uuu...such...such a thing..."

Tears poured down her cheeks.

Even though she knew the method to save her, she could only look at her miserably and powerless. She couldn't save the girl she just became friends with, it was incredibly frustrating.

The droplet spilled and fell on Shio. Causing her to open her eyes slightly.

"Hime...chan...? Why..... are you... crying.....?"

"——Shii-chan?!"

"Are you... crying again... because you're lonely...? Yesterday... when we first met... you cried as well..."

Shio slowly woven the words, but her consciousness was hollow and her eyes unfocused. Her memories seemed confused and she messed up the sequence of the events.

"It's all right. Hime-chan is... amazing, that's why... everything will be... definitely fine... don't cry..."



I love this scene
nauhibon

Shio wiped Fuyuki's tears with a trembling hand, and closed her eyes again.

She was supposed to be in severe pain. The fact that she regained consciousness even if for a moment could be called a miracle.

"...I've been... comforted by you again."

It was the same when they first met.

She saved her from breaking because of loneliness, and became her first friend.

This time it's my turn—that's what she decided when she came here.

"Though it might be unreasonable and reckless."

Even though she was so small and weak, she's been called a genius.

Then, it didn't matter how difficult it was. Fearless like usual, she told herself there's nothing she can't do and puffed her chest.

Think. You can only keep thinking, it's your only weapon.

All the knowledge she absorbed so far, all the experience she has amassed, she used all the information her 'eye' has captured before and derived a reasonable and optimal solution.

If parallel removal of all the viruses via hacking the virtual body was impossible, she had to detach the process itself.

It was something she couldn't achieve alone. But she wasn't alone now. Fuyuki opened the window and appealed to the two people displayed on it.

"...Brother, Rucchan. Please, lend me your strength. Please save my friend, save Shii-chan."

Part 5

Because of a crushing blow from the hatchet, both Taiga and Rui were blown away.

The black knight's specs exceeded that of Taiga's already five or more enhancements ago, after receiving an arm-breaking powerful blow the two rolled on the ground before standing up again.

"Ahahahaha!! You've been focusing on defence for a while now. If you don't resist just a little bit the experiment won't be able to proceed!"

They didn't have time to listen to Angel's loud laughter.

A single blow followed by a storm of violence eliminated all their mental strength, they were barely able to endure it. Both of them were nearly at the limit.

"As expected, this is hard..."

"It's getting stronger and stronger... at this rate it will———Taiga, behind you!!"

Rui saw the hatchet above his head and tossed six creative stones.

The creative stones connected and transformed into a brilliant silver shield which continued to absorb a jet black wave that was emitted from the black knight.

"Shit, that attack too... it's getting pretty bad."

It was a fight they had no chance of winning, it was just when the two were about to give up. Unexpectedly, a window appeared in front of the two and Fuyuki was projected on the screen.

〈"...Brother, Rucchan."〉

"Fuyuki? What is it?"

〈"Please, lend me your strength. Please save my friend, save Shii-chan."〉

There was a bright light in the sky blue eyes that stare straight at them, Taiga and Rui glanced at each other.

What are you saying now. Isn't the answer already decided.

""——Of course!""

Willpower roused their entire bodies. It didn't matter how exhausted they were. If she tells them to save her friend, their hearts will flare up again and again.

"What should we do?"

〈"...please dismantle that black knight. Into as many small parts as possible and in the blink of an eye."〉

"Leave it to us."

There was no need to hear any more. Taiga closed the window and then he closed his eyes.

"...I'll cut him into pieces. Rui, grind him to dust."

"I got it. Parallel Creation(Continuous Creation)——"

The moment Rui started preparing, Taiga opened his eyes wide and jumped using his full strength and unsheathed the nodachi from its sheath.

He didn't think anything, he wasn't bothered with anything. He optimized himself for the sake of cutting the enemy in front of him.

〈"Activate——Synchro Infinity(Breaking the Limit)!!〉

For a limited amount of time he freed himself from all shackles.

It was something only Tenryo Taiga could do, he melded reality and fiction, becoming the fastest and the strongest in the area.

"„Supersonic" third form——"

He put a hand on the hilt, the 《Zygote》 swung the hatchet at him randomly, but Taiga saw through all its movements and it didn't even graze him.

And then aiming at the moment it's body is exposed, Taiga jumped below it and pulled out the nodachi!

"—— 《Amakiri(Heavenly Mist)!!!!》



The blade could be seen only for a moment.

kachin, the moment the cool sound of the sword's collar resounded, the body of black knight gradually broke into a dozen of iron lumps.

„Supersonic" third form 《Amakiri(Heavenly Mist)》 ——It's a sword skill specializing in chopping enemies to pieces. Aside from drawing the sword so fast it becomes invisible, it allows you to slash dozens of times in an instant.

The black knight was chopped into pieces before it could regenerate and the pieces rolled on the ground.

Taiga retreated from the spot immediately and two large rotating creative stones were thrown in.

The huge creative stones spread out and rotated changing into a hundred smaller ones. And when Rui gave a signal, they all exploded!

"—— 《Explosion》 !!"

The blasts overlapped each other and its power increased in a chain reaction.

Exposed to a hundred or more simultaneous explosions, the body of black knight turned into small, barely visible fragments.

"Thank you. Brother, Rucchan."

Fuyuki said her thanks to the two who perfectly executed her reckless request and focused on the window.

《Zygote》 turned into dust.

With the majority of its body destroyed, the reproduction function fully activated, the factors in Shio's body who was a host activated——just as Fuyuki wished.

The process for recreating the black knight's body started, at that moment.

Only in that moment, the virus factor hidden deep inside the virtual body had to come out to the surface.

"——Data elimination process start."

Fuyuki activated 《Synchro Infinity》 again and dived into the sea of data

Like this she reduced the amount of hacking she had to do on the virtual body. However, her work in this area still wasn't over.

It has no meaning if she doesn't eliminate all of the virus at once. She couldn't erase it one by one, she had to hit all five hundred of them at once, it had to be processed in parallel.

"Haa—— Agu——!!"

She was incredibly overloaded. Her brain nerves burned with pain, an alarm bell sounded in Fuyuki's head——saying 'stop it already'.

"With this, its hundred——four hundred more left..."

In front of her passed huge waves of information. Finding single threads among them was extremely difficult as hundred, then two hundreds appeared at once.

"Two hundred... three hundred... dzzuu——...three hundred and fifty——..."

Her thinking circuits screamed.

Enough, I can't do it any more. If you do any more than this your brain won't hold out. Her weakness assaulted her from inside.

——Shut up. Don't interfere.

Are you fine with becoming a cripple? For just one of your friends, are you going to throw everything away?

——Not just a friend. For an important friend.

What about your Brother and your other friend? If you break they'll be sad.

——That might be. But...

"——If I run away here, I won't be able to stand together with those two!!!"

Her thoughts burst.

Computing power, her speed of thought went beyond limit and all information poured into her head through the sky-blue eyes. An enormous

amount of data that would have made an ordinary person pass out in an instant was forcefully covered by Fuyuki.

She continued to analyse the torrent of data at an overwhelming speed with her incredible processing power. Not missing a single piece of foreign matter she continued to save them all in parallel.

"Five hundred... fifty seven... all factors locked on... complete."

The moment she forcefully subjected all of the virus factors lurking in Shio's body, an incredibly severe pain hit her consciousness. It felt as if giant insects were rioting in her head.

"With this——it's all over!!!"

She used the last command with a trembling hand——and after triggering the removal, Fuyuki's vision was dyed black.

The change was dramatic.

The black knight that was lying in countless of pieces started shining with a sky-blue colour one after another and faded away not leaving a single piece.

Seeing hundreds of thousands light pillars rise, Angel had a shocked expression on his face.

"It can't be, my 《Zygote》 was——?!!"

It didn't start the program that would allow him to escape, his thoughts didn't accept this defeat.

Why did I lose?

Its regenerating capability, its strengthening capability, and the condition that didn't allow the enemy to fight back——there was not a single factor that would imply it would lose. Then why was it——?

"Why don't I tell you why you lost?"

"Haa." Angel responded to the voice that was directed towards it, and wondered who was it all of a sudden. There, at a distance where he could be reached with a sword, stood Tenryo Taiga.

A strong will dwelled in his sky-blue eyes, Angel responded with words of a loser.

"...if there is such a thing, I want to know what it is for future reference."

"It's simple——it's because you made enemies out of us. The cause of your defeat, is us. That's all."

Taiga declared with a fearless smile on his face.

Although Angel was taken aback for a moment, it found it amusing and its mouth distorted in a smile.

"I see, I'll keep it in mind——I'll be more vigilant next time."

In the end, Angel's body distorted and faded away as if melting into the atmosphere.

With this, the chain of events that began with the reunion of Tenryo Fuyuki and Karasuba Shio had ended.

Epilogue – The end, and the beginning

"Uu~...Uuu~..."

sharasharashara, the glossy black hair shook restlessly.

Seeing his little sister go back and forth nearby Taiga sighed and said for the fifth time that day.

"...Fuyuki, calm down a little."

She took note of what he said and stopped her feet, Fuyuki was wearing a specific remodelled kimono from Aries. However, a moment later she started to do the same thing again, causing Taiga to sigh once again.

"Haa... there's still twenty minutes until we're supposed to meet. Are you going to continue doing that until then?"

"B-but it's been a week! You know just how long Little Sister waited for this!"

"Well I know but——"

"Ahaha... it's pointless to say anything to Fuyuki when she's like that. She's been waiting for her contact all this time."

Hearing Rui's words he thought 'I guess so', and was reminded of how Fuyuki acted over the past few days. Whenever she had free time she checked on her terminal, he remembered about her appearance as she confirmed if there was any contact from 'that girl'.

——It's been ten days since they defeated 《Zygote》.

When Angel disappeared the blockade was released and the four were able to log out somehow. ——However, neither Fuyuki nor Shio came out of it unscathed.

What Taiga found when he rushed home, was the appearance of his little sister who was lying on the floor.

Although he immediately carried her to hospital, because she overused her brain she had to spend three whole days in bed. Fortunately there was no permanent damage or disorders, and now she was as good as new.

The problem was the other person——Shio.

Honestly, even though Taiga logged her out, he was still a bit lost.

That's because her real body was far away, in the Karasuba's place. He didn't know whether she suffered serious consequences or not.

Even so, there was nothing they could do for her. That's why, after logging out he asked Haya to collect information through her acquaintances.

It seems like when he rushed to the hospital——Haya was already on the move.

The damage caused to her to her virtual body converted into pain and also damaged her spirit. Especially her limbs which were lost to 《Zygote》 seemed like they didn't work.

I'm going to go through rehabilitation and I'll be able to move again, it's all right——after they listened to the message from Shio through Haya, the trio was relieved.

Since then, they had waited for six days. In other words, Shio contacted them yesterday. Because she recovered to some extent she was given a permission to log in, and told them that they'll meet in 《Aries》.

And thus, the three stood at Aries' initial point——and waited for Shio at this golden meadow.

"Uuu... Brother, how many minutes left?!"

"Five minutes. If it's the earnest Shio, she should be arriving about now——oh?"

Immediately after, a light appeared nearby them.

The pillar of light faded away slowly, and behind it appeared a girl's figure.

Silver hair that glittered lightly, thin limbs covered with pure white skin and a hunter costume with a strange amount of exposure. Shio opened her eyes slowly and smiled from ear to ear after finding the trio.

"Can it be, that I made you wait?"

"We just came here way too early. Don't worry about it. ...come on, Fuyuki, go on."

Even though she's been eagerly waiting for this, he had to press her back because she was so nervous.

Although she looked back anxiously for a moment, after seeing Taiga and Rui smile, she went to pick Shio up.

"Eh, umm... it's been ten days, Shii-chan."

"So it was... I've heard from Onii-san. To save me Hime-chan overdid it and passed out. Thank you very much."

"That's... it's Little Sister's fault that you became like that... rather than that, how's the condition of your body? I've heard there was an influence on your limbs."

"Their movement is still a bit dull, but there's no problem as far as normal life goes. The doctor said that if I continue the rehabilitation it will be restored completely, there's no need to worry."

"Is that so, I'm happy to hear that."

Fuyuki sighed with relief. Although she already heard it was all right through Haya, it seems like she was still anxious.

"Yup. I'm already free from Karasuba as well. With this I can finally start my own life."

"...free from Karasuba? What do you mean—it can't be, were you told something by your family?!"

"Well I was an unneeded child in the first place. My only remaining value lied in the fact I could be married off somewhere. But no one will buy defective goods right? They said, and after that I was told I can live how I want."

"That's... what are they thinking Shii-chan is!"

Anger boiled within Fuyuki as she heard those selfish words. After restraining her for so long, they throw her away now that she's no longer needed as if she was a disposable object.

"It might sound awful... but I'm happy with this, that's what I thought."

She was always living according to her family's wishes. She has always desperately tried to live up to their expectations.

And in it, there was no will of her own.

"It's the result of the first choice of my own in my life. I don't regret becoming friends with Hime-chan again."

"...Shii-chan."

The fact that it was a lie, was found out immediately.

Fuyuki knew just how much Shio wanted to be acknowledged by her family since she watched her from up close. There is no way a long period of ten years can be abandoned that easily.

"...what do you intend to do from now on?"

"For the time being I want to challenge many things, and find something I can enjoy. And... umm... for the time being I thought about continuing in 《Aries》, umm..."

They could easily tell the words that would come next.

That's why, Fuyuki said with a big smile.

"——Yes. Let's do our best from now on, Shii-chan."

A gentle and warm feeling filled her chest.

"So with this everything is settled, right?"

"Indeed. It seems like it was worth meddling in."

Seeing the two girls finally get along, Taiga immersed himself in an indescribable sense of accomplishment.

These two should be all right now. No matter what will come next, they won't be cut apart again——that's how strong the bond they created was.

"...ah! Speaking of which, Rui-san still didn't introduce herself to Shio-chan!"

"Nnn? Ahh... I guess you're right."

Taiga had traveled together with Shio, but since Rui had been in charge of Fuyuki she hadn't had a chance to talk with her. And after that they hadn't had time for that.

"Mumumu... Fuyuki's friend is also Rui-san's friend. That's why, I'm going to get along with her too."

"Ohh. Do your best—"

He sent off Rui who started to run towards the two, Taiga was left alone and he looked up at the sky.

The case was settled——although he decided to summarize like that, he didn't really think that way.

That was because there were too many unknowns in this incident. And all of them, were leading towards that mysterious virtual body called Angel.

I'll be more wary next time——that's what it said. Without a doubt, it wasn't done yet.

"Fine. Come if you want. Next time I'll cut you up."

He had to settle it with Angel sooner or later. Feeling conviction in his chest, Taiga started to walk slowly.

Until this matter starts to move again, probably until the not so distant future. He decided to enjoy his normal life in full.

——Under the distant blue sky, he headed towards a garden of girls with smiles blooming on their faces.

Afterword

Long time no see to those who read the first volume, to people who started with the second volume (though I don't think that's likely) nice to meet you, I'm Kazuma Jouchi.

How was the second volume of 『Elysion Virtual Region』? To be able safely release another book makes me really happy.

Ah, from here on onwards I'm going to include some spoilers.

That's why if you want to read the afterword ahead of its place, I recommend you to read the book first.

This time it's the story of Tenryo Fuyuki and Karasuba Shio, and how the two girls were connected by friendship again.

While Taiga is still the protagonist, and Rui-chan keeps them company, this time they only lend a hand.

They only made an opportunity for the two girls to take a step ahead (although the super popular student council president Haya also had a supporting role, she didn't have much screen time. Sorry about that).

Let's talk about the new character, Karasuba Shio.

Although I didn't include it in the book itself, Shio's setting is that she is one year older than Fuyuki. So even though she calls Taiga 'Onii-san', she's an 'Older little sister' for Fuyuki. In other words Taiga has two little sisters now. Oh, though some of you readers may have noticed already, but I like the little sister characters the most. Little sisters are the best!

Silver hair, amethyst eyes and an overall cool appearance. Contrasting to that, she held a burning passion inside of her—the image her character has 'contradiction', it's been even used in the weapon she wielded.

...there's space remaining so I'll talk about games like in volume one.

Probably when this book is being released I might be trying out Dark Souls 2, or so I think〜. Although I bought a PS4, I'm mainly playing on the PS3 since I'm blessed with a lot of titles for that one. I wonder when Watchdogs will be released?

Although I'm really interested in FF14, I'm too scared to devote myself to an online game (Already had previous offences) .

Credits.

For releasing this book I'm indebted to many people just like for the volume one.

Takeishi-sama who is in charge of me and gave me a lot of advices, nauribon-sensei who's drawn cute and beautiful illustrations, bookbinders-sama, editor-in-chief, calibrator-sama, and everyone else who was involved in releasing this book. The greatest thanks of mine for readers who picked up this book again.

I look forward to seeing you all again.

Now then, see you next time.

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